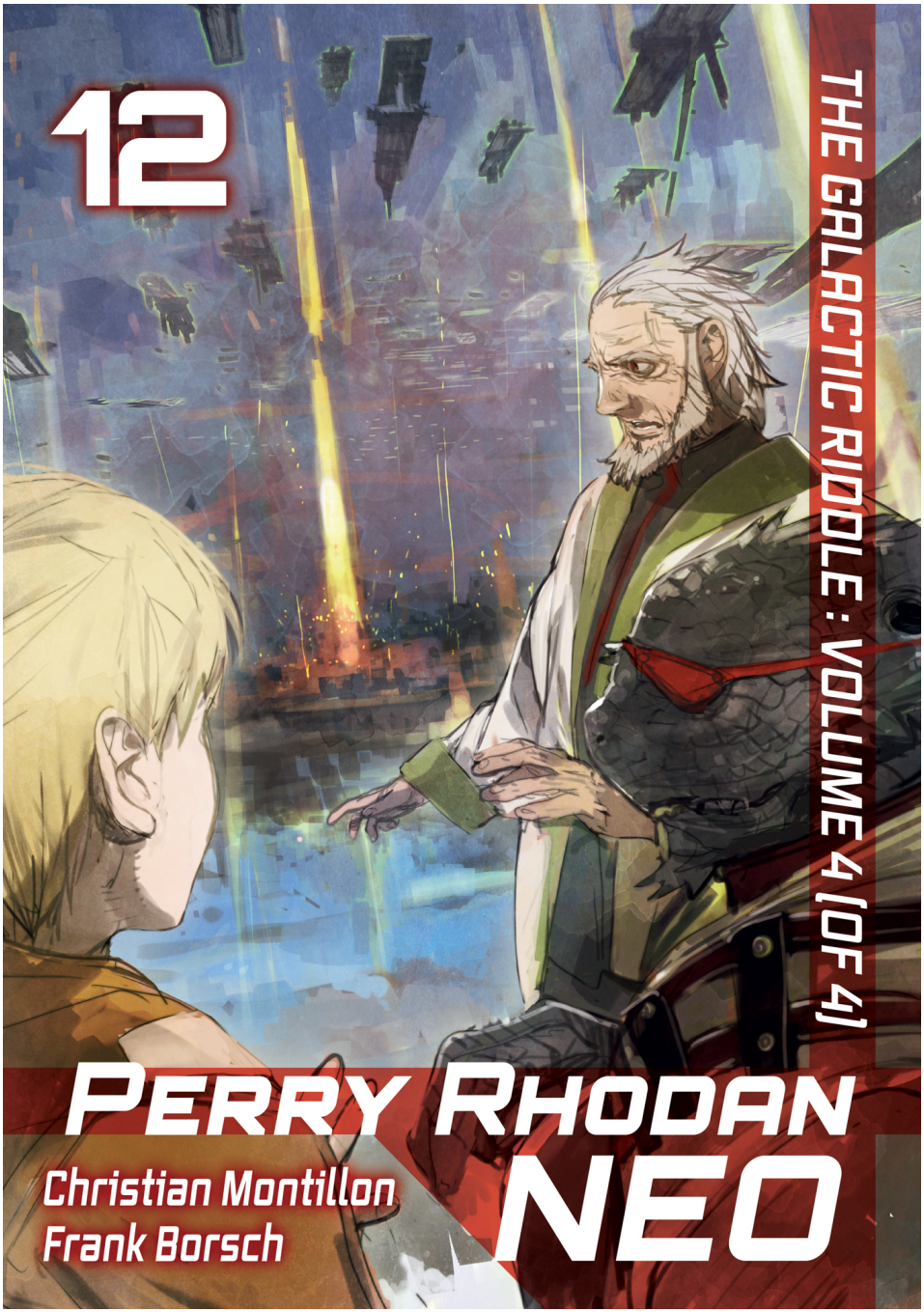
12
THE GALACTIC RIDDLE : VOLUME 4 (OF 4)
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Christian Montillon
Frank Borsch

Table of Contents

Cover

Episode 23: Refuge Atlantis
Episode 24: World of Eternity

About J-Novel Club
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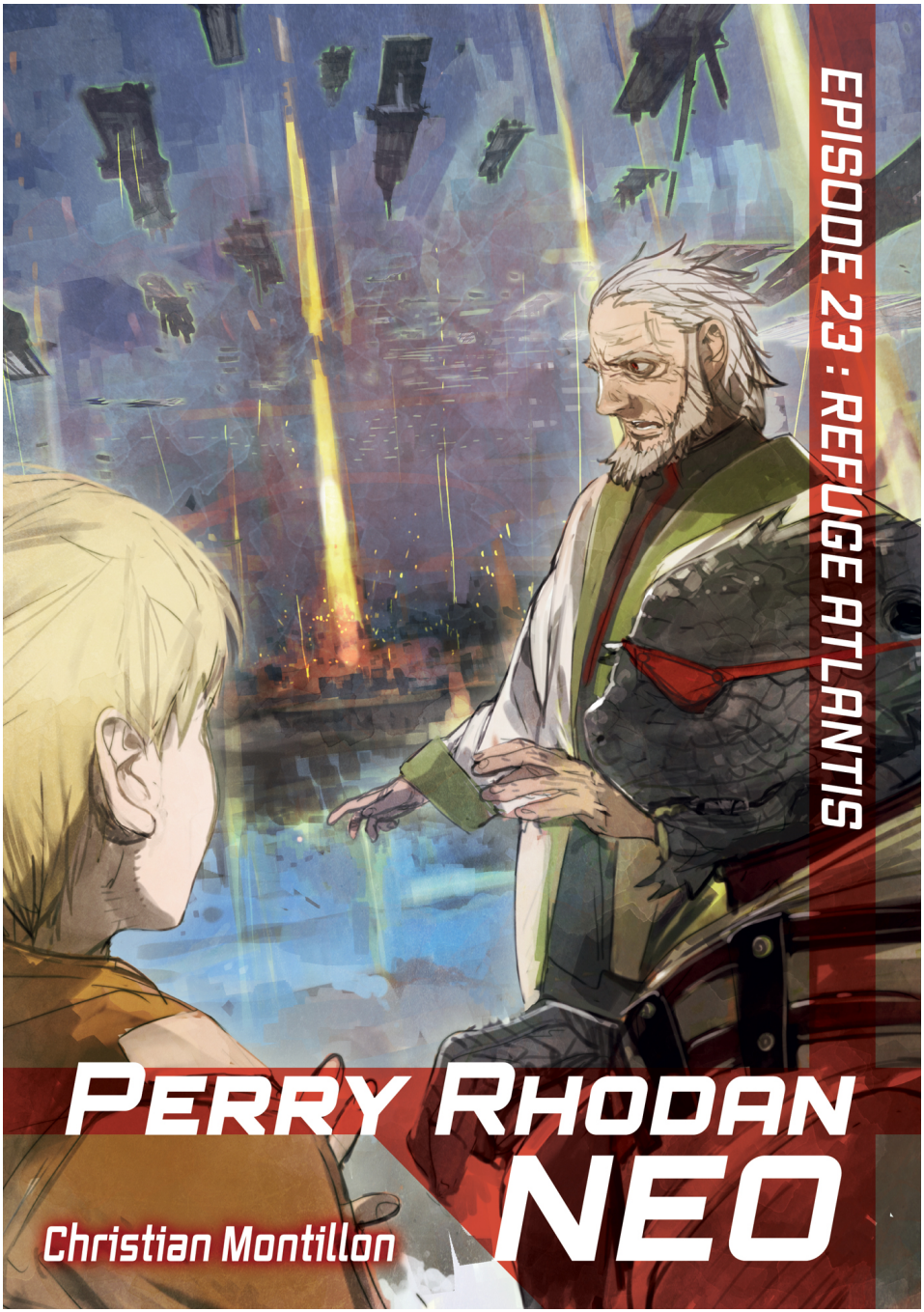
EPISODE 23 : REFUGE ATLANTIS
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Christian Montillon

“Forgiveness is given six times. This is the seventh time.”
Feltif de Khemrol

Prologue

Earlier
The Sign of the Stars

D'ihra's gaze rose to the sky. Shining dots in eternal black.

"Do you see them?"

"Who?"

"The stars. I see myself up there."

"You are the brightest of them all." There was infinite sadness in his voice.

She replied, "I am not one of the heavenly lights. I am the blackness between them."

Godwarn wanted to say something. She looked at him, but he found no words. He was angry, even now. And yet he leaned over to her. He lowered his gaze to the child who must leave D'ihra's womb and who was now closed to him.

"Why didn't you foresee it?" he asked.

This fool still did not understand that a seer did not snatch all secrets from the future; sometimes the gods gave a glimpse of what was to come, but most of the time they shrouded it.

Again came a contraction, worse than before. Not only did she feel something tearing inside her, she even heard it. Pain and nausea washed away her clear thoughts. Blood flowed.

When it was over, D'ihra collapsed. The back of her head struck open. She hardly felt it; her next woe was already approaching. D'ihra knew she couldn't survive much longer. Soon it would be over. The midwife already held the knife in her hand to cut the child out of her so that at least it remained alive when the mother had to die.

D'ihra smiled. The child was allowed to see the light of the stars and even that of the nearest sun.

Suddenly, a figure stood near them. The stranger with the red eyes and the dead, bald skin.

"Feltif!" cried Godwarn. "What do you want here?"

While the lower half of D'ihra's body blazed in flames and the redeeming knife lowered, the newcomer shouted only one word: "No!"

The midwife faltered briefly. "If I do not act immediately, the child will die in the mother's womb with—"

A flash of light hissed, and she froze midsentence and tipped to the side.

The pain ate up D'ihra's mind. She saw the gods with open arms and saw them crying. The child wanted to be born. It was urgent. There was another tear and the world blurred. Now, without the midwife's gratefully awaited knife, she would have to suffer even more. Feltif had done her an evil service.

The stranger's scarred gray hand pressed against her cheek while the healthy arm rested on the floor. "I have come to save you." His red eyes were close in front of her. They were crying. The fingers clutched a flashing, unreal thing. He turned away and bent lower. His ear was shriveled, his skull bald.

In the next moment, the pain disappeared as if it had never been there. *I'm dead,* thought D'ihra. *At last.* She only regretted that she would never see the child.

But she was alive.

She didn't know what had happened, but suddenly Feltif held the child, a boy, in his hands. Its face was wrinkled...wrinkled and soft. A little liquid dripped from his tiny mouth. Clear, dark eyes looked at her, awake and surprised. Afterbirth covered the stranger's hand.

"Why am I still alive?" D'ihra asked. "What have you done?"

Feltif's breathing was heavy. "Something I should never have done. Forget it!" He placed the boy on her chest. Its little body was warm, and its heart was racing. "I'm leaving now."

"Where to?"

"Where you can't follow me."

"Let me come to you and thank you once the boy—"

"No!" He turned away.

D'ihra stared after him while Godwarn remained rigid and silent. The child cried. She pressed it tighter to her breasts; his little fingers groped and his mouth found its target and latched on.

The stranger turned around again. "Remember that this never happened."

D'ihra's thoughts were perfectly clear, and she saw where Feltif

was going.

The city.

Then she realized that he was not a human being like everyone who lived there. None of the beings that lived in the bastion at the tip of the big island ever left it. Except Feltif, whom everyone had thought for days was just a traveler from a distant village. Suddenly, she knew better.

"Come back!" she screamed as both a command and a request. "I have to tell you something!"

To her surprise, Feltif obeyed. While the boy drank and kicked his legs, the stranger understood her without any additional words and brought his ear close to her mouth.

"I know where you live." She spoke so softly that not even Godwarn could hear it. "But I'll never tell anyone. There is only one thing I ask of you: tell me the name of the city and from where you once came."

He slowly drew his head back, and his left hand stroked the newborn's hair fluff. Then she felt his breath on her temple. "My full name is Feltif de Khemrol," he whispered. "I came from the stars. They left their mark on me." He stroked his burned, scarred skin, and his gray hand clenched into a fist. "The city forbidden to you and your kind bears the name Atlantis."

"You are a god," she said.

"No," he lied.

But she knew better.

1.

What You'd Like to Forget
Crest da Zoltral

The chaos was gone, and for the first time in an eternity, Crest found time to take care of something that he would have preferred to forget...

His pain.

Tramp lay behind them; the war, the suffering, and the surprising knowledge of the people and the planet of the Ilts seemed to be far in the distance. The *Peskar XXV*, the auxiliary craft used by the three time-traveling refugees—Crest, Michalovna, and Trker-Hon—was now...somewhere.

The translight trip had led them blindly into space. It had been the only way to escape. The Arkonide knew that he actually had to worry about whether they were in danger again, whether they were now drifting in the middle of one of the numerous other battlefields of this war. *Actually.* But he couldn't. His body demanded his attention.

He was far too ill to rush through a war zone in a stolen craft and try to escape the Methanes. They had simply spread everywhere during this time, in the final phase of the Great War, ten thousand years in the past.

Confusing, isn't it? asked the familiar voice of his extra sense somewhere in the midst of his excruciating pain. *Are the Methanes everywhere? Or were they an eternity ago?*

What does that matter? Crest replied in a silent thought dialogue. *We are stuck in the past, and even semantic subtleties won't change that. Eternal life is as distant as it has always been, if not further away than ever.*

It didn't make a difference whether they phrased anything correctly or not: the war threatened to destroy them all between the fronts if the cancer that ate his body from the inside didn't kill him first.

A dull feeling of numbness emanated from his neck. He groped over the cervical vertebrae and regretted it immediately. Even the slight pressure was too much. He heard something crack and felt dizzy and nauseous.

The craft's bridge turned, the ground in front of him rose steeply into the air, the ceiling tilted down as a side wall. Crest was looking for something to hold on to, because of course it wasn't the *Peskar XXV* that was moving, but rather he who had lost his balance. *Pull yourself together!*

Only when Tatiana Michalovna screamed and Trker-Hon fell across the room in a bizarre movement, with rowing arms and his tail dangling, did Crest realize that he was wrong in this case. His surroundings actually were moving. The sound of a detonation stifled the Earth woman's scream, and the blast wave smashed into the Arkonide's back. Helpless, he staggered forward and hit the ground.

Instinctively, he raised his arms to protect his head. Heat raced over him in a scorching wave. The air was swirling, and as he peeked out from under his elbow, he saw that Trker-Hon was now lying on the ground, which had been a side wall until the blast. The Topsidan's back was scorched as a fire fizzled out on him.

Crest heard only a muffled roar, mixed more and more with a murmur—perhaps his own blood, driven by his weakening heartbeat. The universe collapsed, and the center that took up all the burden was him, Crest, the old, dying Arkonide. His foolish search for healing in eternal life was over. He could hardly breathe even though he opened his mouth wide. His lungs did not want to absorb any lifesaving oxygen. Michalovna appeared in his field of vision. Her mouth moved. She was shouting something, but he heard nothing.

For a moment, he wondered if the noise of the explosion had made him numb, but then a high-pitched whirring sound rang out. The metallic floor was torn open, and a shredded supply cable shot up as if it were an attacking, angry snake. Blue sparks burst out of its end and danced weightlessly in the air before burning up. There were multiple bright flashes, followed by loud static.

Crest wanted to stand on his feet, but his legs gave way under him. The pain, it was too much. Everything was too much. The anguish in his body pulled him towards an abyss where the promise of forgetting his surroundings cheerfully beckoned.

Someone grabbed him. He saw Michalovna's face above him.

"The ship's lost!" The Arkonide heard it said like a distant whisper, though her contorted expression meant that it had no doubt been screamed. "What should we do?"

Something ran wet over his upper lip. *Blood from your nose.* His extra sense's comment wasn't necessary, nor was its sober, crystal clear statement: *It comes to an end with you.*

"Call for help," he said. He could not hear himself. Then he closed his eyes and embraced unconsciousness and approaching death.

Water dripping from the end of a pipe.

Green leaves moving easily in a barely noticeable wind.

An earthly beast crawls infinitely slowly over a wall: a snail.

On an abandoned table stands a glass of clear liquid.

A metallic wind chime rotates lazily, with a glass ball in its center.

In a swimming pool, a single eye drifts until it is sucked away in the overflow.

And all this in monotonous colorlessness and ghostly silence.

They are confused images, meaningless details from his past, which emerge in the darkness and pass just as quickly as he swims towards a small point of light. Eyes look at him, and from somewhere comes a voice:

C...

An Arkonide dwelling funnel, the house he grew up in when he wasn't on a spaceship. His mother's face.

...r...

The realization: eternal life is the dream of a fool, and the legends lie, even if they are spread over the entire known galaxy.

...e...

The knowledge of passing away brings grief.

...s...

Grief that he will not see Thora again, whom he adopted as a daughter and who has been a comfort to him.

...t.

The name stretches for a century and a second, and something claps his cheek. Slight pain until...

"Crest!"

The Arkonide tried to answer immediately, but failed.

"I gave you an ampoule."

What does that mean? He couldn't think clearly. *No wonder.*

"Wake up, Crest! We need you!"

He did not know where the small point of light somewhere far in front of him was coming from, but the eyes that looked at him from that point of light were those of Tatiana Michalovna. He lifted his eyelids, blinked, and through a veil of tears peered at the Russian woman's figure.

"It was the last ampoule, Crest, but I..."

"The last one?" he asked, remembering. The pain-relieving ampoules that the Ilt Nurghe had given him on Tramp—his lifeline. But there had been many more.

She also understood without further explanation what he was getting at. "The others were destroyed. The explosions on the ship, you know?"

He didn't know. "What happened?"

"Too many hits before we could escape. Our craft is a wreck that stubbornly refuses to break apart. But it won't last much longer." She formulated the news with clear, sober words and a lot of bitterness in her voice. "We've sent a signal for help, exactly as you ordered."

I can't command you, he thought, but he didn't say it. It would have been a waste of time. "Is there already...a reaction?" he asked instead. It was infinitely difficult for him to speak; every word was torment. His throat was dry. At the edge of his thoughts grew the horror that the pain-relieving ampoules had been destroyed. Just like that, casually, as if it didn't mean much. But when the effect of the current dose wore off and the crippling pain returned, there would be no more pharmaceutical help. Not without a miracle.

And miracles did not exist.

Or did they?

Because Michalovna was silent, he repeated: "Has there been a reaction to the call for help?"

She shook her head.

"Are the Methanes nearby?" he asked. At this stage of the war, they were everywhere. They contaminated space like a plague, waging a merciless war of annihilation against the Arkonides.

She shook her head again, so at least they didn't need to worry about them.

Most of the knowledge about this war had disappeared into the darkness of the past; after all, it had been ten thousand years ago, and historiography had to interpret far too much to speak of facts. History in this case was the lie that most researchers had agreed upon.

"What do you know about the Methanes, Crest?" asked Trker-Hon. The scaly skin around his bulging lizard snout shone. His tail dragged over a piece of torn ground. His tongue was briefly visible; it was bleeding.

Crest hesitated. "Hardly anything. Except that they call themselves Maahks and don't breathe oxygen," he finally said. "This war is too far back. However, researchers do agree on one point."

"And that would be?" asked Michalovna impatiently.

"The Methanes were inferior to the Arkonides in terms of weaponry. In direct battle, a single Arkonide ship would always win."

"But?"

"But they compensated for this disadvantage by having tremendous numerical superiority. Like locusts, they spread millions of times across contested areas and penetrated everywhere bit by bit."

"As in the case of Tramp?"

"Nevertheless, the Arkonides ultimately won this war," Crest confirmed.

"How?" asked the Russian.

He could only give a disappointing answer. "If only we knew... Supposedly, there was a silver bullet."

They were silent, and Crest was only now aware of how good he felt. The contents of the ampoule, the last ampoule, had worked wonders. He stood up and even succeeded without much effort. He wasted no thought on what might come. The destruction of the *Peskar XXV* threatened to kill him anyway.

"Is there access to the—"

Automated repair mechanisms, he had been about to say. Something literally tore the word from his lips—not another explosion, but an alarm signal and an emergency hologram popping up despite the damage. It showed three Methane ships.

So, their emergency call had been received after all...but not by those who should have heard it.

Demeira on Thanos

"Demeira! Don't forget your duty!"

There was no such voice, but that did not change the fact that Demeira on Thanos, fleet commander of the battle cruiser *Ektem* and thus, currently, leader of the convoy of two light and two heavy cruisers and the fifteen associated transports, could hear the words just as well as if they had been spoken right next to her.

"Demeira! Don't forget your duty!"

Or: "Demeira! You are a soldier of the Space Academy!"

Or, worse than all that: "Demeira! *I* expect it from you!"

Her father had always pronounced her name as only he did, from the beginning, for as long as she could remember, with the eccentrically exaggerated syllable pronunciation Dem-e-i-ra, as if it were four words, and the last letter sounded almost like "or." He would never admit it, and she had to give him credit for never saying it, but she had read it a thousand times in his eyes that he had wanted a son and not a daughter. His whole life was ultimately broken, and she, Demeira, had blamed herself for years because she did not possess the strength of her mother in this regard, who overlooked it with imperious arrogance and continued to devote herself to the wine of the sweet Raitschan slopes.

Duty had been everything to him, and that's how she felt now. Mostly. Officially. As a high-ranking military officer, as commander of a battleship and its convoy in the middle of a war with the Methanes, she had no other choice. But there was a little more to her life. A small voice in the back of her head, which joined that of her extra sense, had activated exactly ten years ago, telling her that she had to hear and follow the distress call of an Arkonide ship.

Orders and structures were one thing; life was completely different. This correlation corresponded roughly to the relationship between military strategy and the fighting of a soldier at the front; there were a lot of similarities, but also huge differences.

When her decision was made, she suddenly had to laugh, in the middle of the bridge on the *Ektem*, in her commander's seat, surrounded by shimmering holographs: *Don't forget your duty!* This time it was not the voice of memory that spoke to her, but that of her extra sense that called for order. She couldn't hold back her laughter, even if it meant that the team gave her surprised looks.

Deadly for discipline on board, but good for them, because it wiped away their last concerns. *Now more than ever!* Her decision had been made, and why was she in the rank of commander if not to decide for herself what seemed necessary and appropriate?

So she decided to forget her duty and follow her feelings. Was it really just a coincidence that they had picked up an Arkonide distress call during their waiting time in normal space between two transition jumps until the engines reported full operational capability again? Or was there more to it? Fate? The hand of the gods?

"Change of plan and course," she said. "We will fly to the source of the distress call." At the same time, her fingers casually scurried over a holographic button, sending the corresponding data set to the pilot's seat.

He hesitated. "Commander?"

"What is unclear about this order?" she asked. "Or do you mean to tell me that I have to take control personally?"

The pilot stiffened. "Of course not. I'll set the course."

Demeira felt good, better than at any moment since she, through an intermediary, had received the Emperor's order: *His Million-Eyed Majesty, long may he rule, long may he shit light, until one day he burns*. She was doing the right thing. The Emperor liked to plan everything, and he might even be right thanks to his hundreds of advisors...but he wasn't out here experiencing the war.

It is a misery to have to listen to your thoughts, her extra sense spoke up.

Why? Are you ashamed of me? You probably forget that you could not exist without me. We are one. You are me.

Do you really think I need you to point this out to me? But one more thing, Demeira, my dear: the reverse is also true. You are me too. And without me, you would never have come this far. Commander with a secret mission from the Emperor? That is only possible if an Arkonide has an activated extra sense.

Continue, she thought. *What are you getting at?*

Nothing. I just wanted to tell you what you...

What I already know. So, do you have anything useful to contribute to the current situation, extra sense?

She enjoyed every second of this inner banter. She felt free. Free from the constraints of their mission. Free from the overpowering hand of her father and the entire Arkonide Empire.

Free from the millions of eyes of the Emperor, who in reality bore only two on his face: the other 999,998 were said to be carried by his 499,999 compliant helpers in all areas of the Empire, licking his imperial boots.

Heretical thoughts indeed; considerations that she was never allowed to say out loud. The Emperor may have been a good ruler, better than many before him, at least, but that didn't mean Demeira worshipped him as a god. She preferred to think for herself. And if that meant she was responding to a cry for help to save Arkonides in need, so be it.

Yes, she felt so good that she could almost forget about the cursed Methanes who seemed to have more ships every single day. The damn brood of poison gas-breathers was everywhere.

Demeira, Demeira, reprimanded her extra sense, *I hardly recognize you.*

Is that so? She grinned. *Then, off to a glorious future! Let's see what awaits us!*

As if on cue, the pilot announced at that very moment that he had calculated the course and that the *Ektem*, along with the units of the whole convoy, was about to leave. "The engines are ready to follow your command in a few moments for takeoff."

The way he emphasized it left no doubt that he wanted to absolve himself of any guilt for the automatic recording protocol. He had obeyed an order, no more, exactly as was expected of him. The responsibility was born by Commander Demeira on Thanos, who broke the iron rule of war in these seconds: there were no rescue missions in view of the numerical superiority of the Methanes. Those who stayed behind were left behind. Nothing and no one could change that. Except for the will of the one who commanded a spaceship.

Let's hope, Demeira thought, *that it's worth it.*

The convoy transitioned into translight flight.

Crest da Zoltral

An explosion, far too close, tore Michalovna from her feet. For a moment, she swayed in a bizarre posture, much too far backwards, before hitting the ground. Crest tried to grab her and give her support, but he struggled to keep from falling himself.

A tongue of flame, first colorless, then blazing bright white, shot from the ceiling. It fizzled out within the blink of an eye. What remained was the stench of burnt oxygen. Crest knew how narrowly they had just escaped death.

A high-energy outburst, analyzed his extra sense in its typical sober way within a millisecond. *Plasmatic gas from the supply lines has been released. The energy has ignited the oxygen molecules. A chain reaction would easily have been possible.*

Why have we been spared?

His extra sense hesitated for only a second—half an eternity by its standards. *Luck* was its analysis, which was as imprecise as it was illogical.

Something pounded from behind against the back of Crest's knee. With a cry, he gave in and fell. He spun during the fall to see who had attacked him, instinctively raising his arms in self-defense.

Michalovna's leg was still stretched out. Crest's gaze turned upwards. Where his head had just been, an energetic field of separation and isolation flickered. Behind it, it wafted brightly like the interior of a sun.

"What is that?" asked Michalovna. Of course, she hadn't attacked him but saved him, without him realizing what was going on.

"A slightly delayed chain reaction," he replied. "To put it simply, the air is burning up there. The ship's Positronic has set up an automatic protective and insulating field that contains the energy outburst. Behind it, temperatures beyond our imagination prevail. If the field hadn't installed an optical damper at the same time, we wouldn't be able to take a look at it without going blind."

"That force field nearly cut right through you!"

Crest took a deep breath. *Right down my throat,* he thought. "The emergency system couldn't take me into consideration."

"Radical method," said the Russian in a caustic voice.

"That saved the ship, plus you and Trker-Hon. Without the protective field, not even ashes would have remained of us." Despite his sober analysis, his fingers trembled. Even in retrospect, fear constricted his throat. Still, he couldn't suppress the feeling that it was a merciful death: quick and without a thought to even realize what was happening. One second alive, the next atomized.

"And now?" asked Trker-Hon. He crawled towards the two, repeatedly glancing up at the shimmering wall of energy. "Now it

will be even harder to gain control of the ship than before! All holograms of external observation have failed! Most recently, we saw that Methane ships arrived. Should we just sit here and wait until they finish off our…wreck with a few targeted shots?"

Crest hesitated.

There is only one answer, commented his extra sense.

But the Arkonide did not want to say it. It sounded too final. Too sobering. Too cruel.

"Crest!" urged the Topsidan.

So he said it. "Yes." He closed his eyes. "Let's wait for death together."

Suddenly, he felt a touch. He looked. Michalovna's fingers were wrapped around his. She nodded barely noticeably. *One last consolation,* he thought. *We won't die alone.*

2.

Escaping War and Fate
D'ihra

D'ihra looked anxiously at the sky. Not only did one of the flashing tears of stars pass over the bright blue, but a storm was also brewing. If they ventured out to sea, there was a risk that the coming storm would cost them their lives. However, waiting longer and delaying the departure could prove to be just as deadly.

She turned to her brother. "What shall I do?" she asked, so quietly that no one but him heard. The other three were far enough away. "We don't have much time left."

Egmogast giggled barely audibly before answering her. She undoubtedly understood him as the only one of her small group of refugees because she had had to endure his cumbersome language for eighteen years now...since his birth, when she herself had been an infant of just over a dozen moons. He had been born with a tiny tongue, much too small for his broad mouth. For most, therefore, his words were only the incomprehensible sounds of an imbecile.

"Since the war has raged, every sunrise has been a grace. Tell yourself, how many with whom we once shared our lives have died? We all have little time left, one way or another."

This was not the choice of words of a mentally disabled person, but of a man with the sharpest mind D'ihra knew. Although it did not look like it at first glance, he was blessed by the gods, as was she, albeit in a different way.

Of course, Egmogast was right. But his words didn't provide an answer to the question that bothered her. Should they leave or wait until the next day for the storm to pass?

As a seer, the others trusted her; she had to make the decision for the few refugees who had set out in the chaos of those days to seek refuge in the mysterious city on the coast across the sea...in *Atlantis,* as she knew since that night. She had kept her word and never spoken the strange name, just as she had promised the god

named Feltif de Khemrol after the birth of her son.

"You decide," said her brother: *Yedssi,* the others heard, no more. He didn't even bother to whisper.

She nodded. If there was still salvation for those who trusted her, it was at their destination, the city of the gods. Or those who had come from the stars, as Feltif had claimed. But this goal had to wait, at least one more day. To venture into the storm would be mere foolishness.

"We won't leave until tomorrow!" she ordered, this time loud enough for everyone to hear.

Then she looked at the shore and the vastness of the sea. Back there, somewhere, Atlantis was waiting.

And in the mysterious city, she would hopefully also meet the stranger who had saved her life the night her son was born. She guarded his name like a treasure. Feltif was the only one who could answer the question that burned in her thoughts:

Why had it come to this?

Why had a god risen from heaven and helped her and her son in his human form if the little one had to die two solar orbits later?

And why was D'ihra condemned to live on feeling the pain of not only no longer being a mother, but also a widow?

She was still staring out at the sea, immersed in the eternal questions that occupied all her thoughts, when Morokar's warning cry startled her and her companions.

It was immediately clear to her what it meant. Enemy scouts had tracked them down and attacked. If it wasn't a small squad, they were all as good as dead.

Gods, what have I done?

If only she had led them into the boat, out to sea, into the storm. Nothing could be worse than the anger and thirst for blood of their opponents. For several moons they had been descending on one village after another. They pillaged, they murdered, and if the women and girls did not flee in time, a horrible existence awaited them in the slavery of those savages, as playmates for the warriors.

D'ihra did not know what drove the hordes to attack; no one knew. Since the time of their grandfathers, their enemy had not ventured over the mountains, but suddenly they had been there, without a sign, like demons from the underworld, with bright red painted faces and murderous axes. The gods had also been silent

and had not sent D'ihra, their seer, a single sign. Not even bad dreams full of darkness and blood.

Egmogast appeared next to her out of nowhere, a throwing knife in his hand. He put his left hand on her shoulder for a moment, reassuringly. "Come!" he whispered. *"Chonn."* He pulled her with him, along the beach. In the distance, a gray wall of clouds rose above the sea. Their destination lay in the bushes, the foothills of which protruded into the water, to where her boat was anchored.

They had agreed to meet there in an emergency. D'ihra called it *Star Barge* because it was supposed to take them to the city of those who, according to Feltif, had come from the stars. At the top, formed from reeds and papyrus like the entire boat, she had carved one of the nocturnal zodiac signs so that it would guide her.

Then the noise of a struggle, estimated to be ten, at most twenty meters away. Morokar and the others were fighting back.

Weapons clinked. Another scream, and suddenly Morokar burst out of the bushes. He was holding a sword, but he didn't attack, instead staggering backwards. He fled as he had, to D'ihra's knowledge, never done before in his life. The left side of his face, neck and shoulder underneath were covered in blood. A piece of fabric dangled in front of a pale piece of bone.

One of their opponents followed. He wore a helmet with four hornlike tips on the angular skull. Black lines ran across the broad upper body. Around his neck hung a chain, the details of which D'ihra could take in with a quick glance, because she had seen it far too often and knew the obnoxious customs of her enemies only too well since they had begun attacking. A myriad of small, white finger bones dangled from it: one for every adversary killed.

Just as the attacker was reaching out with his axe to hit Morokar again, Egmogast's arm shot forward at D'ihra's side at lightning speed. The throwing knife twirled in the air several times and found its target with deadly accuracy. The young seer even thought she heard the crashing sound with which the blade penetrated the skull bone. A gurgling sound followed, then three more steps. First the axe fell, and immediately afterwards, so did the enemy.

Morokar approached her. "Three more," he said, bleeding profusely.

"You're..." D'ihra began.

He cut her off. "Not as bad as it looks."

She couldn't imagine it. Rather, it seemed to her a miracle that Morokar was still alive at all. "There are at least three enemy warriors left," he repeated.

Egmogast was already standing by the corpse and in the next moment held the throwing knife in his hand again. With the other, he picked up the enemy's axe. Without saying a word, he handed the knife to D'ihra.

She grabbed the blade without hesitation. She hated using weapons to defend herself, but fate was not so gracious as to give her the choice.

The siblings stood back-to-back, looked around, waited for the attack of the other opponents. D'ihra stood so close that she could hear the heavy breathing of the injured Morokar.

She gave him a look. He was deathly pale, and his eyes gleamed as if in fever.

Feltif de Khemrol

The inhabitants of this world were stubborn and haughty. *Just like the best Arkonides.*

Feltif de Khemrol liked them. They were barbarians, but he had lost his heart to them.

No one could misunderstand the orders and guidelines for life in Atlantis. For all the Arkonides whom fate, or the will of the Emperor, had led to this remote colony of the Great Empire: no contact with the natives, no interference in their culture, and certainly no mixing with them. Fraternization was strictly forbidden

Like every other Arkonide on the planet, Feltif de Khemrol knew the rules all too well. But he did not comply, and although there was no justification for it, something eased his guilty conscience. Atlan, the supreme commander of Atlantis, personally knew the escapades of his Tato and covered them up.

For more than two planetary years, Feltif had repeatedly fled the city for hours or days into the world of the savages, as the other Arkonides called them. For him, they were much more than that—beings full of naivety and zest for action, as inventive and sensitive as they were primitive and brutal. A contradictory people with enormous potential, which touched and fascinated Feltif. He described them to himself as a people full of possibilities that were

still hidden deep within them, but that sometimes flashed out if you looked very closely.

Moreover, the Tato could not deny that he was tired of the eternal battle of the Arkonides against the Methanes. He had fought enough battles between the stars, won victories, and one day burned in enemy fire in the truest sense of the word. The Great Empire was at war, and the Methanes were bleeding it dry by repeatedly striking with hundreds of ships.

The people of this planet also knew war, but they were fighting for survival. The war waged by the Methanes, on the other hand, was incomprehensible to him: the Arkonides had nothing that the Methanes could use. And if there were conflicts on Larsaf III, they were conducted by primitive means. Axes, swords, slingshots, spears; they were able to cause brutal wounds in individual cases, but what were all the weapons of this world compared to a single shot from the thermal weapon of an Arkonide battleship? How heavy did a dozen deaths weigh when two villages marched against each other, compared to the explosion of a heavy cruiser, in which a thousand crew and passengers drifted among the stars in the eternal nothingness of space?

And in the midst of such a Larsaf war, Feltif found himself in these hours, much to his displeasure. He sought peace in the cool, stone buildings, through whose rough window niches the view often reached far over the forests of the plains and rolling hills. He loved the lives of these people, from their laughter around their campfires to the smell of smoke and sizzling meat to the stories they told each other.

However, as he marched along the shores of the great sea east of Atlantis, watching the impending storm above the water, he heard the sounds of battle: screams, the clinking of weapons. After some thought, he decided not to interfere, but just as he made this decision, he was angry with himself.

Do not interfere.

This was exactly what he had been commanded. The commandment, which he was violating anyway solely by his presence in this area on the west coast of the great continent in the vicinity of the Arkonide colony; by the fact that he had left Atlantis in the first place. Nevertheless, his military training ran deep and he wanted to exercise almost reflexive restraint.

“Now more than ever,” he said to himself and to the vastness of

the sea.

With a quick glance, he checked whether his bioplastic mask was sitting correctly. Perfect. No one would recognize him as an Arkonide: his eyes were dark like those of the inhabitants of this area, his hair not white but a dark brown, and the burns on his face would go unnoticed. Even those who knew him would not recognize him.

He had already observed several small battles of this kind from a distance. The distribution of roles was clear; the inhabitants of this area took on the role of victims. The aggressors were muscular warriors with painted faces and minimalist armor made of leather and simple metal; true battle colossi, similar to gladiators. Nevertheless, a man like Feltif was far superior to them, even without a handgun. The elegant, Arkonide Dagor melee technique was superior to any brute force.

He followed the noise and the screams along the shore. Waves rolled in from the sea, now slightly agitated by the approaching storm, and washed around his feet.

Feltif de Khemrol was ready.

D'ihra

D'ihra smelled the stench of sweat and blood, and she now believed that it would be the last thing she took away from this life.

Why weren't they attacking?

"There are three more waiting for us?" asked Harufont, who a few moons ago had ground the village's harvested grain and baked it into flatbreads mixed with water and spices; he had never harmed anyone. When the attackers had overrun their village, he had smashed the skull of one of them with a millstone. Since then, his eyes constantly jerked back and forth whenever D'ihra saw him, and he seemed as if he had never slept longer than a fraction of a night after.

Morokar raised his blood-soaked arm. "At least. I saw three. Maybe more?"

D'ihra's fingers clung to the handle of her throwing knife.

"There!" said Egmogast as clearly as he could. That one word was probably understood by the others, especially since her brother's hand pointed in a certain direction.

D'ihra also recognized a movement in the bushes. She tensed. But it was not the angry enemies that rushed forth, but a single man who slowly stepped out. Brown hair, dark eyes, simple but robust clothes...and above all, a completely calm, serene posture. He raised both unarmed hands and held them out to them. "You are no longer in danger."

No one replied or even moved. D'ihra realized that she had to take on the role of leader once again. "What have you done?" That was more important than any courtesies or the question of who the stranger was. Nevertheless, she remained suspicious. What if it was an enemy trap?

"Your enemies are dead." The newcomer spoke with strange emphasis, as if he had only recently learned her language.

"You killed them all..."

"I was lucky," he interrupted her. Apparently, he understood exactly what she was getting at. "I was able to sneak up and overpower them from behind. Not a fair fight, but those...beasts didn't deserve one anyway."

"I agree!" said Harufont. It sounded less determined and radical to D'ihra's ears than he would have liked.

The stranger lowered his arms. "May I come closer?"

D'ihra made an inviting hand gesture. "We owe our lives to you."

"Don't be too hasty." Her brother was now talking so fast again that surely no one but she could understand his ponderous sounds. "Maybe there are other enemies hiding nearby? We have to be careful. And who knows if this stranger doesn't belong to them and has set a trap for us?"

Egmogast was right. Despite the good fortune of having escaped murderous hand-to-hand combat, they could not allow themselves to become reckless.

"Are you sure you killed them all?" She asked the newcomer. Only now, when he was only a few steps away, did she discover the dark stains on his clothes; the blood of their enemies. But something didn't feel right, though she was unable to put it into words. Suddenly, her mistrust grew. Who was this stranger who had appeared out of nowhere and saved her?

Just like back then.

As soon as this thought occurred to her, she thought she recognized something in him; the way he moved brought back

memories. His face looked completely different, and without her position resembling that night two solar cycles before in such a startling way, she would never have been able to draw the connection so quickly.

It's him. Again, he has appeared out of nowhere and saved me.

She looked at him, and he turned away, looking one by one at the four men: Egmogast, Harufont, Komelur, and finally Morokar. His gaze lingered on the latter. "Let me look at your wound," he pleaded.

"What do you think you can do?" Morokar asked gruffly.

"I know how to treat injuries."

Oh yes, thought D'ihra. *You understand some things, Feltif de Khemrol, god who descended from the stars.* She put her hand on Morokar's uninjured shoulder. "Leave him. I...see that he will help you."

"Is that so?" asked the stranger.

She sensed that he was avoiding her gaze. "The gods have revealed it to me. They sometimes give me impressions from the future."

"From the future," the other repeated thoughtfully.

"We are trying to reach the strange city on the other side of the sea with our boat. Have you heard of it?"

He was silent for a few moments. "The city?" he asked.

She smiled. "We are seeking refuge there from the turmoil of war and the aggressors from the East. We hope the Rakers won't follow us there. Will you accompany us?"

Now he looked at her. He recognized her, no doubt. The only question was whether he thought it possible that she recognized him as well, despite his perfect disguise. He pointed to the *Star Barg*e floating on the light waves of the shore. "Using this boat?"

D'ihra nodded.

"I'll accompany you," he said at last.

3.

A Warship without Battles
Tarts de Telomar

The disharmonious, steady buzzing changed its frequency every few breaths. Sometimes it sounded louder, sometimes quieter, then higher or lower, but never completely disappeared.

It was annoying like so many others, but it could hardly sour Tarts de Telomar's mood any further. The commander of the *Tosoma* lay with his battleship in the shadow of a sun not far from Larsaf's star...and waited.

For far too long. He lurked like a predatory spider in its burrow, except that the mindless animal had nothing better to do than fulfill its primitive purpose in life, while he was left wondering why he was wasting his precious time. But he was acting on the highest orders. Atlan had sent him, the lord of the colony, to Larsaf III, which had given him the name "Atlantis" after Atlan's own name—much to the displeasure of his old confidant and disciple. Atlan had not resisted, yet he had let his teacher and companion go. Tarts was proud of his neologism. It was playful and yet meaningful.

Atlantis. A good sound for a bad, shabby colony that should never have been founded. But as far as his influence at the Emperor's court extended, Tarts's hands had been tied, and they still were. So much so that he had to wait with all the might of his *Tosoma* for some wandering mutts: Methanes that might one day materialize with their ships in this deserted area of the galaxy. A task for a cadet in his early years at the Space Academy.

"Commander?" The question came from Cunor ter Pelgan, one of the officers whose names the superiors knew from the beginning, be it for better or for worse. People like him immediately stood out.

Tarts wondered if he should ignore the radio request that Cunor ter Pelgan had given the *low priority* identifier. But he also knew that the weapons officer would not rest until the conversation finally took place. And Tarts could hardly imagine a time when he'd

had even less to do than in those moments. Boredom was a bad counselor. “Yes?” he replied resignedly.

“May I speak frankly?”

If you didn’t, I would have taken you out of my ship’s headquarters long ago and let you monitor the garbage robots. “In the conference room.”

Tarts handed over command to his deputy for the duration of his absence on the bridge and got up. He passed the projected holo controls without crossing them, as it had become a bad habit for some officers when they thought they were unobserved. In their deactivated state, it didn’t cause any damage, but it still seemed...inappropriate. A ship like the *Tosoma* demanded a certain respect.

He reached the entrance to the small conference room in front of Cunor ter Pelgan, just as military precedence dictated. At least the inferior officer was smart enough to abide by the simplest rules.

Tarts entered, stopped in front of the table anchored in the floor, and watched as his officer also entered the room. He was very familiar with his file.

Cunor ter Pelgan was as slim as he was tall; one did not see the enormous tenacity and resilience which, by all accounts, distinguished him. He was considered the best melee fighter of his year at the Space Academy on Arkon and had achieved true mastery in the Dagor. In some other areas, however, he hadn’t managed great marks. Thus, while teachers in diplomacy and military strategy attested to his innovative ideas and creative approaches to problem-solving strategies, they also pointed out that he did not think far enough ahead and that his ability to recognize his own mistakes was virtually nonexistent. In a word, a daredevil, as occurred in many young noble families. Life undoubtedly held some surprises for him to make him a truly good officer.

A service unit glided up. “Refreshments?” it asked in a perfectly modulated voice, inappropriate for a plain, conical machine. Instead of a simple, shiny metallic something, it would have to belong to an expensively dressed Arkonide woman of noble origin.

Tarts ordered water, tasteless and freed from all trace elements by a complicated multistep filtering process. This was the only way to bear it after months of storage in warships. Many laughed at him behind closed doors because of this peculiarity, denied that there was a difference, but Tarts knew what he liked without being able

to blame it on the stubbornness of old age.

Cunor, on the other hand, ordered a dark wine. Of course, the wine had been freed from all alcohol content during service hours and was artificially produced on board the *Tosoma*. A disgusting drink, in Tarts's opinion, that had about as much to do with a wine from Arkon's slopes as a delicate steak with a pile of beef dung, but alas, to each his own. There were more important things.

Hopefully.

"Well?" he asked, looking at his weapons officer invitingly.

"Since you have already allowed me to speak frankly, Commander..."

"Of course!"

Cunor showed clear uncertainty for a moment. Good. "The morale of the occupation is not at its best. We have been lying idly in the shadow of the sun for too long."

Involuntarily, Tarts's gaze wandered to the outer holo present in all rooms, which he had already stared at a thousand times. It showed the red dwarf star around which three lifeless worlds orbited: a dark lump of rock, a hellish world with temperatures that made all life impossible, and a gas giant that, from his current point of view, seemed to almost be reached by the Sun's solar flares.

The sight of these worlds was as bleak as their entire situation.

The service robot returned and served the desired drinks with one of its tentacle arms. Tarts resumed the interrupted thread of conversation.

"You're not telling me anything new."

"We are part of the 132nd Operations Squadron," Cunor added. "While important battles against the Methanes are being fought near the center of the Empire, we are wasting away in the most remote province."

You echo my own feelings, boy. "Not exactly an overwhelming realization, officer! And you should be glad that this room has no ears that pass on what you hear here. Wasting away is not a word the Emperor would like to hear. We are protecting the colony on Larsaf III, which is led by his son, Atlan, himself. An important task." The last three words sounded completely hollow even to his own ears.

Cunor ter Pelgan's lips twitched. He wanted to say more, probably ask exactly the same questions that bothered Tarts de Telomar: Why on earth had the Emperor sent his son to the most

meaningless corner of the galaxy to found an Arkonide colony on an even more insignificant planet inhabited by primitive natives? Did the million-eyed Mascaren da Gonozal want to punish Atlan? Or did he want to protect him from the war? An absurd thought! And had the Emperor simply forgotten his son afterwards? Why had the urgently needed supplies been overdue for months?

But Cunor was smart enough to remain silent. One could not go too far, not if you were not absolutely sure of who you were speaking with.

Tarts sipped his glass; the water tasted stale and was too cold, but it at least dispelled the dryness of his palate. Cunor, on the other hand, left his wine untouched, merely running his index finger around the top of the glass again and again, sometimes creating a singing sound.

"You're a veteran, commander," he finally said. "You've fought the Methanes all your life."

"Tell me something I don't already know."

"You have developed a sixth sense for danger that is far more pronounced than mine."

Flatterer.

"Don't you think," continued ter Pelgan, "that this calm is deceptive? There are...rumors."

Aha. So now you're finally getting to the point. Tarts drank again. "You know that rumors per se are speculative in nature. Cutting and dangerous."

"And yet sweet," said his counterpart. "It is said that Kerlon da Hozarius, on his return from his last exploration trip, brought...a strange device to Atlantis."

On impulse, Tarts wanted to end the conversation immediately and expel his weapons officer from the room. But it was important to be smart. It would only add to the rumors and prove to the whole team that he knew more about it, more than he would have liked.

So he showed no expression that this topic interested him. A topic about which hardly anyone really knew anything—except Kerlon, Atlan, and himself.

A strange device. The transmitter... Tarts laboriously suppressed a tear as he thought of it. There was an incredible aura in that technology, as if no mortal people had developed it.

"Commander, one question." Cunor ter Pelgan fixed his gaze upon the service robot as if by chance; it was, in fact, a sign of his

insecurity. He obviously wondered if he was going too far. “What is this device? What did Kerlon da Hozarius discover?”

Tarts could hardly suppress his anger. *What right do you have to even ask me this question?* He did not believe that the officer actually expected an answer; rather, he was playing. The weapons officer wanted to test the reaction of his commander.

But he had come to the wrong person. Hardly anyone knew politics and intrigue better than Tarts, of all people. He had accompanied Atlan, the son of the Emperor, all his life. He went in and out of Arkon’s court, or at least he had done so before the war had taken them both to this remote part of the galaxy. So he had long been a part of the ubiquitous power games at the heart of the Empire, whether he liked it or not.

That’s why Tarts liked to remember his military career and enjoyed going to war: because everything was better than politics, even the Methanes. But days of senseless lurking and hiding made him unsure.

“There are…rumors,” he replied in a tone as if he himself were keenly interested in learning more. Which was partly true, but on a completely different level than Cunor might believe; in this context, he was concerned with questions that someone like his weapons officer did not even know. “The fact is, however, that Atlan sent Kerlon back to a place from along his journey, to a nearby solar system.”

Ter Pelgan waited, eagerly taking in every word, and yet he only heard what he already knew. In this way, Tarts signaled a willingness to talk without passing on a single ounce of real news…a skill in which he had achieved true mastery at the Emperor’s court.

“Not only that,” he continued. “Several colonists from Atlantis accompanied Kerlon on his trip this time, and they have been provided with an auxiliary craft from the *Tosoma*.”

More false information that Cunor had undoubtedly known for a long time; and if not, he could find it out by other means. But that had to be enough. “I know I can rely on you, Cunor ter Pelgan.” That meant something like, *If you find out something, tell me.* Only that would never happen. But it gave Cunor food for thought.

The weapons officer reacted as expected and understood that this was the end of the conversation. He bowed. “Commander.”

Both drank, whereupon the service robot took the glasses back.

Politics and leading the crew of a warship in times without a fight, Tarts thought, *are equally tiring.* In those moments, he wished for Methanes to appear.

4.

The Trail to Myth
Crest da Zoltral

Although there was dim lighting, Crest felt as if he were sitting in complete darkness.

The *Peskar XXV* reared up, jerked like a stubborn horse. Suddenly, the ground beneath them sagged, as if the craft had suddenly been exposed to murderous stress and would race through space without artificial gravity. Around them, it cracked and crashed; the metal shell screeched in protest.

The three refugees did not know what was happening out in space. There was no information on the holograms or any display showing their location. Their little world consisted of the craft's bridge, and they couldn't see beyond it. All the more threatening was the cracking in the walls and floors, and the echo of distant explosions.

"Strictly speaking," Michalovna said, summing up the situation, "we are sitting here in a coffin drifting through the cosmos, waiting to finally die. And to make matters worse, some madmen are beating against the coffin."

Trker-Hon crawled towards the exit of the bridge. They still couldn't stand up because the force field above them was at head height. Crest had warned the others several times not to touch it.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

The Topsidan turned around. His small eyes narrowed and seemed to merge with his facial scales as the membranes snapped shut. "Leaving and then I'll see where. I will no longer sit here waiting like a mindless rakass to be slaughtered! Someone is doing something to this ship, and if it's the Methanes, I at least want to know."

"Who else would it be?" asked Michalovna.

"It's not the Methanes," Crest said. "From what I know about this war, such behavior would be absolutely atypical. If they were,

they would have shot down the craft long ago and…"

"Carved a notch into their metaphorical belt?" the Russian woman finished his sentence. "Crest, who else could it be?"

"You sent out a distress signal," recalled the Arkonide. "Is it so unlikely that someone intercepted it and reacted to it?"

The telepath opened her mouth, probably to contradict him again, but remained silent. "You still have hope, Crest? I like it."

Crest turned to her. "Listen to me carefully, Tatiana! If we really survive this and Arkonides are waiting for us out there, I'll need your help."

"In what way?"

"Your telepathic gift," he explained curtly. "We must—"

"Follow me," Trker-Hon interrupted as the door slid aside in front of him. "Let's see if our rescuers or our executioners are waiting for us."

Demeira on Thanos

Just a few shots; it wouldn't take more.

Of the two Methane ships, only clouds of debris remained, whose glow in the eternal black of space was soon extinguished entirely. The third enemy unit tried to escape. One of the heavy cruisers of their convoy put a quick end to their hopeless attempt. There would have been no need for the commander there to report success. Of course, Demeira on Thanos tracked it on a strategic ambient hologram on the bridge of the *Ektem*.

In total, it had taken less than three minutes since they had rematerialized in normal space after their translight flight. It had taken them three minutes to save the lives of the crew aboard the wrecked craft—and without much effort. Sometimes, Demeira thought, it was worth ignoring general guidelines and letting orders be orders.

She did not yet know whether it actually had been worth it. According to its identification, the wreck was an auxiliary craft belonging to the vessel *Peskar*, a unit the commander had never heard of. That was not surprising given the large number of warships of the Great Empire.

The location revealed the craft's pitiful condition. If they didn't hurry, the crew would die even without the help of the Methanes.

The hull would simply break apart, or all technology would fail and the artificial atmosphere would escape through hull breaks.

Demeira gave the order to infiltrate the rescued craft along with the wreckage with the help of tractor beams. The *Ektem*'s hangar could easily accommodate it. After that, they had to keep looking. She only hoped that by now the whole crew had not died. There were no signs of life at the moment, and even the distress signal had ceased. Not good signs.

"Condition of the transition engines?" she asked curtly.

"The *Ektem* is ready," a technician replied over the radio, as expected. The translight stage had been short, not at the limit of the range for a battleship. "The same goes for the two heavy cruisers and the light cruisers. The transport vessels, on the other hand, will need some time to prepare for another stage. I'm sending the current projections."

Demeira only skimmed the diagrams; mere routine, nothing more. Of course, the transition engines of civilian units were weaker and depleted faster than those of military ships: a necessity in wartime. One convoy, however, had special conditions: no one could survive in the long run without the other; they were mutually dependent on each other.

The Methanes were lurking everywhere, looking for scattered Arkonide units to destroy them. Unprotected transport ships were at their mercy during the regeneration phases of the engines, which is why the idea of mutual support had long since been put into practice. Warships could easily destroy small groups of Methanes; without the civilian transports, the crews of the various colonies would be lost because they needed supplies. Some ensured the survival of civilians and the military, the others a safe journey of the supply units.

It was a calculation that clearly worked. Therefore, the commanders had the strictest orders never to respond to calls for help. A single scattered unit was dispensable, but a convoy as a whole was not. And certainly not the one led by Demeira on Thanos, which was on its way on the highest orders to deliver the urgently needed goods and spare parts to a seemingly insignificant colony...and to fulfill a secret mission at the same time.

And yet Demeira didn't regret what she had done. She left her place as commander and demanded to be informed immediately if further enemy units were sighted. Experience had shown, however,

that it usually took some time for reinforcements to arrive for Methane ships in distress, if they had even sent distress calls before their destruction. They probably didn't have time to.

Demeira made her way to the main hangar to see who she had saved. She had almost an hour to spare until the last civilian transporter of her convoy was ready to fly again. First on treadmills and soon in a small one-person robot vehicle, she raced along the main corridor, which brought her from the well-protected bridge to the outside through the inner ball shells towards the hangar.

Once there, she entered the raised ring gallery just below the ceiling and watched the infiltration of the salvaged wreck. The hull was broken in several places, apparently due to explosions inside the ship. In addition, she discovered typical damage as a result of Methane bombardment. The commander had already seen such things dozens of times: the black discoloration of the Arkon steel due to the extreme heat loads; the damaged ring bead; the molten gun openings...

Nothing new.

The hangar bulkhead closed again, and the tow beams set the craft down roughly. The crash of metal on metal boomed all the way to Demeira, who stood behind an energy field projected especially for her, which also partially shielded her acoustically by massively attenuating the ambient noise. With a harsh wave of her hand and an imperious command, she turned it off, stepped into the anti-grav elevator and slid down.

Even before she reached the ground, she watched as combat robots accessed the craft via an air lock and poured into the ship. They had to be careful in times like these. There was a small risk that the Methanes had captured the small unit before the convoy had appeared.

And all this, she thought, *is probably for nothing. If Arkonides are still alive on board, they would have made themselves known long ago.*

Crest da Zoltral

Crest heard the sound of heavy, stomping footsteps. He was scared; they were being boarded.

The door to the bridge was broken down and combat robots stormed in. Three large, bulky machines. Arkonide units.

Did miracles really happen? Apparently, they did.

Nevertheless, his fear remained and kept him firmly in its grip. The robots grabbed him and his two companions, dragged them from the bridge, across the small craft to the hangar of a foreign ship, which the *Peskar XXV* had apparently infiltrated.

No one was waiting for him; there was no one to explain to him what was happening. Instead, tow jets grabbed the small auxiliary craft, which continued to be shaken by explosions, and pushed it out of the hangar, out into space, where it was finally destroyed in a myriad of smaller explosions.

The probability of what had happened was smugly described by his inner voice as *low; you don't want to know how small,* to which Crest mentally replied, *You're right.*

In fact, he was not interested in an exact calculation, because it didn't matter. It had happened, and only that mattered, whether it was unlikely or not. However, his extra sense was not satisfied with this. *Sure, there was a distress call, but...*

This time, Crest interrupted the thought. *No buts. We're still alive and now we should focus on keeping it that way. We may be among Arkonides now, but these are our ancestors from countless generations ago! It may well be that our difficulties are just beginning.*

It was necessary to avoid any number of...blunders that they could stumble upon. That's what Reginald Bull had once called it on Earth—a very catchy saying, as Crest found. He did not know a comparably simple and apt formulation in Arkonide.

There were too many questions their rescuers would ask that Crest and his companions were not allowed to answer. Their true origins had to remain obscure, as well as the fact that they knew the outcome of this war with the Methanes. Yes, the Arkonides did finally win, but Crest did not have the slightest idea how this had been achieved ten thousand years ago and, at the same time, sometime in the future. Or when the constant battles ended. Was it a question of weeks or months or even a few generations? Too much was unknown...

The old Arkonide's scientific curiosity was piqued. It didn't matter that he was dying and that their situation could easily be described as desperate. He was in a position to find out the truth about a bygone era in the history of his people. A fascinating thought.

But how are you going to make those discoveries? his extra sense

asked. *By observing? Or do you plan to actively intervene and change what has already happened?*

The warning that sounded clearly between these words wasn't necessary. Crest already knew he had to be careful. They could change the history of the Empire, perhaps the entire galaxy, for better or worse, through seemingly insignificant actions. And he had no illusions; the chance that everything would change for the worse was greater. What if the present to which they wanted to return no longer existed because of their actions in the past? What if the fate of the planet Tramp and its inhabitants had been different without their intervention? What if these Ilts now developed into an important power factor...or didn't?

There were many options, and it was simply impossible to consider them all. No matter how he looked at it, there was only one thing to do: he had to act to the best of his knowledge and belief and...wait to see what happened.

And the one who held the strings of the future of this past firmly in her hands, for him and his companions, was undoubtedly the female Arkonide who now entered the hangar and looked at them with a fixed gaze full of contempt.

"My name is Demeira on Thanos."

Her voice perfectly reflected Crest's first impression of her: bossy, confident and...condescending? No, she sounded disappointed but tried to hide it. A subtle but important difference. The Arkonide paid attention to every nuance. The more accurately he was able to assess his counterpart, the better his chances of getting away with the story they had prepared in the chaos.

He glanced at Michalovna. As a telepath, she could read the Arkonide's mind. According to what they had hastily discussed, she gave him signals.

Disappointed indeed, Crest thought. *She had probably hoped to save more than three ragged figures at the end of their strength.*

"I am Crest da Zoltral," he said. It was an Arkonide name and at that time as good as any other. He could not identify himself in any form anyway. As the only Arkonide of the group, he had to take on the role of the speaker. "These are my companions, Tatiana on Michalo"—an Arkonide-sounding name might be helpful—"and Trker-Hon."

"Crest da Zoltral," she repeated. Her skin was elegantly pale;

her white hair touched her shoulders with its tips. Under her uniform, she had an almost boyish figure. Her breasts were as small as children's fists. She seemed fragile but in all likelihood wasn't. Being a commander in times of war suggested otherwise. "A name I've never heard before."

He thought for a moment. "I'm glad to hear that." It was a statement that might arouse her curiosity. If he succeeded, he was already a small step further.

"Oh?"

Crest suppressed a satisfied smile. It was a success. He was silent for a moment, waiting.

"I command the *Ektem* and thus the convoy that my battleship leads," Demeira on Thanos continued. "As you can imagine, I have more important things to do than wait for you to grace us with more information."

Her smug choice of words could not hide her anger. Crest decided not to delay the game any longer and acted quickly.

"I thank you for the rescue, also on behalf of my two companions. I was working as a scientist on a research project important to the war effort. The *Peskar*, under the command of Agidus da Andeck, served to protect the project. Methanes took us by surprise and only our small craft narrowly escaped. Further information..."

"I understand," interrupted the commander. "You will not be able to give any other details because they are secret. Correct?"

Crest hinted at a nod of appreciation. He blinked a tear of excitement out of the corner of his eye and took a quick look at Michalovna. The Russian woman briefly put the fingertips of both her hands together: a sign that Demeira on Thanos apparently believed their story.

Finally, the commander turned away without comment and casually said, "You will be assigned cabins. A request has been sent to Arkon. As soon as I receive an answer via hypercom, you will find out about it."

Crest mulled over the facts. Arkon was far away; the radio request had to run safely through several relay stations, which in turn were undoubtedly preferred targets of the Methanes. An answer could well take a few days. "And until then?" he asked.

"You will accompany the convoy aboard my ship to its destination." Again she turned away.

"Where's that?"

On Thanos replied, without turning around, "An insignificant colony. Larsaf III."

The Arkonide stared at her. *Further evidence that miracles do indeed exist?* replied his extra sense. *Or just a new, amazing coincidence?*

Much more than that, Crest was convinced. Only he couldn't put it into words. All that came to mind were hackneyed phrases. Luck. Karma. The Hand of the Star Gods. Order in entropy. Providence.

Once again, he thought purposefully for his extra sense. *It doesn't matter. We must accept it as it happens.*

Larsaf III was the Arkonide name for the planet whose inhabitants would later call it Earth and, more recently, Terra. From there, they had set out into the unknown through a transmitter jump, which had taken them into the deep past. And now their chaotic, dangerous odyssey, which had begun in the underwater dome off the Azores, led them back to the same place.

It is not the same place, his extra sense corrected him matter-of-factly. *How could it be, ten thousand years in the past?*

For once, Crest did not object, and not only because he did not feel like having a fruitless discussion. Far more important things were going through his mind. According to all available facts, he had assumed in the underwater dome that the unknown commander of this very colony had been immortal...or still was. A first, very concrete indication of the goal of his search: the world of immortality.

The myth of this world was spread throughout the galaxy, if only you knew how to listen and what questions to ask. Eternal life, subject to neither cellular aging nor disease. Possibly immune to all kinds of injuries. A place where what living beings from all worlds had always strived for was fulfilled, since the moment a thinking being first understood that there was more than himself or that his life would one day end.

This realization gave rise to questions to which there had previously been no answers, at least none that Crest would have been willing to accept. Death was omnipresent in every existence and was even the goal and the end...or maybe not. There were fools who sought eternal life from the flimsiest sources, using methods that were doomed to fail from the start. No civilization knew this

final, ultimate secret. Religion, medicine, science, spirituality, ethics, rules, and laws of an ordered society: none of it offered a solution.

Not for Crest. Not for an Arkonide whose body was being eaten away by an illness that soon threatened to drag him into eternal nothingness.

No priest could help him anymore, no savior, no medic with all the advanced medical technology of the galaxy. Aras may have been able to straighten and heal a broken bone within seconds, regrow an arm, even regrow a damaged organ to replace the destroyed original...but only something greater than anything known to their world would change his underlying condition.

A secret.

A myth.

An encounter with immortality.

The Planet of Eternal Life.

"Crest?" asked Trker-Hon. The three of them were sitting in the quarters the Arkonide commander had assigned them. Their freedom of movement was limited to this area, and there was a guard at the door. Demeira on Thanos showed very little distrust, which Crest was more than happy about because it could have been far worse. Apparently, they were not bugged; Tatiana's telepathic probing of those responsible had yielded the same result as an examination of the space. On Thanos largely believed their story, trusted them, and, with minor restrictions, treated them like guests, not prisoners.

The room was dimly lit. There was only a single chair on which Crest could have sat. The Topsidan was leaning against the wall next to the narrow bunk, and Michalovna was sitting on the floor in front of the entrance to the small hygiene cabin, her legs nested in a confusing posture she called *cross-legged*. Crest repeatedly discovered bizarre details in humans. A truly interesting people, even in countless trifles. How much he would like to follow her further path: that of Michalovna and other mutants, that of Perry Rhodan, who had something special in him that he could not identify.

Apparently, he remained lost in his thoughts for too long. Trker-Hon spoke to him again, this time with a raised snout. "Is it a coincidence?" What he was referring to was perfectly clear.

“What do you think?” asked Crest.

Trker-Hon was apparently silent at the end, with the wisdom that had already been attributed to him ex officio as the sage of the Topsidans.

Instead, Michalovna gave an answer. “Many among my people do not believe that there is such a thing as coincidence.”

“Then what do they believe?”

“That everything is controlled by a higher power, whatever they call it. Or that every decision, every significant moment, is predetermined by selection. If it does not happen in a certain way, it will lead to ruin or would have ended there long ago.” She laughed. “Nonsense, if you ask me.”

Crest looked at the Russian. “Tatiana, what do you believe?”

“Believe?” She made a dismissive gesture. “It has nothing to do with belief. I know I have free will. I decide how I want to live. That I went through the transmitter with you was my decision, whether it was smart or not. If I make a mistake, I will have to bear the consequences. If I achieve success, it’s on my merit. So it’s a coincidence that we’re now heading back to Earth. No one guided us to the *Ektem*, of all places, or made sure that Demeira on Thanos received our distress call.” She almost talked herself into a rage, pulling her legs up in her sitting position, putting her hands on her knees, and looking expectantly at her companions.

“This free will you’re talking about,” Trker-Hon finally said. “Who lent it to you?”

She seemed irritated. “I possess it because I am human. An individual. No one had to give me the right to make my own decisions. Lending... A strange idea.”

“So?” The Topsidan rubbed his back on the wall. His scales scratched over the metal.

This one word did more than a long philosophical speech. Michalovna looked unsettled, chewing on her lower lip.

“Let’s take it as it is,” suggested Crest, who was fascinated by the intellectual appeal of the discussion, but that didn’t change the fact that it was a fruitless conversation. They could deal with theory later, if there was a later. “What do we do when we reach Larsaf III?”

Of course, neither of his companions had an answer. How could they? They had to wait. Were they on the verge of reaching their goals? Would they soon find their way to the Planet of Eternal Life?

Or, the thought electrified Crest, did the Earth of the past represent this world? Had it become a myth because it had long since lost its special function? And was the real coincidence that ten thousand years later, Crest and the *Aetron* had ended up on Earth's barren moon?

He could consider it from every angle. Each consideration only led to new questions, whether philosophical or more direct.

They had to wait and see. Wait until they reached Earth again, or Larsaf III, and the Arkonide colony on that world with the mysterious, immortal commander.

5.

Terra Incognita
Feltif de Khemrol

Star Barge.

Feltif de Khemrol thought about the name for the ship that had been built entirely of papyrus and reeds. It sounded as if D'ihra had chosen it out of sheer hubris. It suited her, suited almost all these people who fascinated him so much for that very reason.

This boat would never be able to reach the stars, not even lift a single inch from the eternal floods of the sea. But it had so far served the purpose for which it was built perfectly, although Feltif would not have thought it possible. Not at the primitive level of development of the inhabitants of Larsaf III. But they had already brought it to high skill in special craftsmanship.

A boat made of reeds to sail across the vastness of the sea, he thought. *Once the thought occurs to them, they will try to leave their planet with a ridiculously dilapidated construction, perhaps stretching sails to catch solar winds.*

The Arkonide Tato stood on the deck of the *Star Barge* in his mask, which externally transformed him into one of the planetary inhabitants. He felt the wind on his face. He ran his hand through his hair and let it billow. A torch was attached to the mast that carried the sail; its flickering light was scarcely enough to illuminate the deck, let alone look into the darkness of the night before them. The sea around the boat sank into deep blackness; Feltif could only hear the sound of the waves and the sound they made as they hit the sides of the boat.

It would go well as long as there was no storm; however, he feared that the *Star Barge* would not be able to survive a real storm.

By now, he knew all the people of this small group of refugees that D'ihra led. Her of all people... Feltif kept thinking about whether it had been a coincidence that he had met this human woman again.

He had recognized her immediately and, in his boundless surprise, thought he could see in her eyes and in behavior that she knew who he was. But he must have been mistaken; his disguise was too perfect and very different from the one in which he had mingled with the people two years prior.

She could not have recognized him. It was impossible. Unthinkable.

And if he found more variations to express this alleged fact, perhaps he would believe it himself.

A whole day at sea brought them purposefully closer to Atlantis, the colony that for D'ihra and the others was a city of the gods and for him the home far away from his home, Arkon. Even at night, Egmogast, D'ihra's brother with the heavy tongue, managed to stay the course perfectly. They navigated based on star constellations, which is why the boat bore its name, or so the visionary claimed. A perfectly logical reason, but something completely different came to mind: a scene that should never have happened. *My full name is Feltif de Khemrol,* he had said after saving D'ihra and her unborn child's life. *I came from the stars.*

Since then, he was convinced, she had carried within herself the longing for space. For Atlantis.

For him.

She thought he was a god, and when he tried to put himself in her shoes, he could understand. She had no way of coming to a different conclusion. He had delivered her child with the help of technology that had to be pure magic to her, infinitely far from the midwife's knife that would have ended her life. The everyday life of an Arkonide seemed to a man of Larsaf III like the work of the gods. Once, in ancient times, it was probably no different for Arkonides, even if their autocratic people liked to forget it and their relatives considered themselves the crown of all creation.

In the sublime silence, interrupted only by the sounds of nature, footsteps rang out. He could distinguish them from all others by their sound.

"D'ihra," he said without turning to her.

She was not surprised. "You're not sleeping?"

He laughed. "I know I'm in good company."

D'ihra placed both hands on the tightly tied bundle of reeds that served as a safety rail at the edge of the ship, behind which there was only darkness, a short fall, and eternal floods. "I've

already slept."

"But?"

"But now I'm thinking. Will we reach the city? And what will await us there?"

"I don't know," he lied. The words came smoothly and flatteringly over his lips. In this respect, he had long since become accustomed to lying; he had done it for many years whenever he left Atlantis. Only once had there been an exception to this rule. Even then, D'ihra had been close to him, bleeding, exhausted, and infinitely surprised.

She was silent.

"How do you know the way to the city so exactly?" he asked. "I've heard rumors, but..." He broke off tellingly. May she interpret it however she wanted.

"You can also reach the city by land," D'ihra added. "At least until you can see the fantastic buildings from afar. But the...residents don't allow visitors to come any closer. They seem to have eyes everywhere."

"You hesitated?"

"The residents. The gods. Whatever."

He now also closed his hands around the bundle of reeds, his left hand came very close to her right. "You sound as if you have already experienced that view you were talking about."

"More than once."

"But if the way by sea takes two days and one night, going by land..."

"Three times longer, yes. I took this trip several times to look at the city from a distance. Now that the enemies are lurking everywhere, that path is too dangerous. All we can do is try to go by boat to find refuge from our enemies. And to see the tower and the tears of heaven that fall there."

Tears of heaven? Feltif wondered for a moment before he realized what she meant. Auxiliary supply craft. Small crafts flying to the ships waiting in space.

"The tower?" he asked, to say something. Of course, he knew exactly what she meant. Even from a distance, Atlan's living area had to look impressive.

"It towers above everything," said D'ihra. "It rises to incredible heights, and it shines when the light of the sun falls on it. It is more powerful than the highest mountains and smooth as...as a lake

when there is not the slightest breeze. And at the top is a transparent pyramid that can't be compared to anything I've ever seen."

As he listened, Feltif imagined himself taking D'ihra by the hand, floating with her in the anti-grav lift to the tip made of Cyrii glass, and showing her Atlantis.

A needless thought. He didn't know how any of this would end anyway. What would become of the boat if the five refugees in it actually reached the shore of Atlantis? The colony was taboo for all people on this planet, and he, Feltif, was not allowed to lead anyone inside.

And he was certainly not allowed to have feelings that connected him to a primitive.

Nevertheless, he had agreed to accompany this group on their boat. His craft, with the help of which he could have reached Atlantis within a few minutes, had been sent back to the city via long-distance radio and autopilot. In an emergency, he could call it back to him in an equally short time.

Now, he stood on the boat, smelling the damp reeds and wondering what he was doing. Had he lost his mind? The technology of his people, travel in spaceships, the war against the Methanes... All of that seemed infinitely distant to him. Life among humans and the scent of this woman named D'ihra were much more real. Perhaps the only reality that existed.

That was the moment when lightning flashed from the sky in front of them and branched out a thousand times. An uplifting sight, but there was no time to enjoy it. Because at the same moment, thunder rang out.

D'ihra

Rain pounded down on them. The *Star Barge* was right in the heart of the storm. It had broken from one breath to the next, as if the wrath of heaven wanted to unleash itself upon them.

Suddenly, the bow of the boat lifted, so that D'ihra was smashed against the bundle of reeds and slid along it. She felt herself crashing against the boat's weak structure. *I fell overboard*, she thought. Then something grabbed her upper arm hard and pulled her back.

Feltif dragged her towards him, to safety. Only there was no more safety. The boat surged upward again; water spilled over its deck, foaming against her legs.

Egmogast, who was steering the ship, shouted. Out of the small structure in the middle of the boat rushed Morokar, who had recovered surprisingly quickly from his serious injury after Feltif's treatment. Harufont and Komelur followed seconds later.

Another flash lit up the sky, for a moment bathing everything in bright, surreal light. As a result, D'ihra saw exactly how the sail bent too far to the side in the storm and smashed into Komelur's back. Everything happened far too fast for anyone to react. Komelur went overboard, a bundle of frantically moving arms and legs, face frozen with pain and fright, disappearing first into the darkness and then into the floods.

Masses of rain fell like a waterfall into a lake. The lantern broke; the light went out.

We won't reach Atlantis, D'ihra thought, and for a moment she thought she heard Komelur screaming again.

Harufont jumped to the edge of the boat, as if trying to save his friend in a mad attempt. Egmogast pulled him back before taking the helm again. But the storm raged too suddenly and too hard to keep the *Star Barge* on course. He wouldn't even be able to prevent them from capsizing in a few moments.

The boat reared up, and something in the mast cracked loudly. Why hadn't the gods shown D'ihra what lay ahead for their small group? Why hadn't she seen the storm in advance?

She knew the answers herself. Because a glimpse of what was to come was a rare grace even for a seer. And maybe she had even received a warning without understanding it. Why else had she slept so restlessly that it had driven her back to the deck? Only the sight of Feltif had distracted her. She was a fool, and that would cost her only friends their lives. Komelur had preceded them all by only a few breaths.

The boat smashed into the depths as if it were falling down a mountainside. It crashed into the floods and a wave swept over them, higher than the *Star Barge*. The suction ripped her feet away, and as she fell, her mouth filled with water. Reflexively, she swallowed, choked, coughed, and spat out. She slid helplessly, beat around, looked for a foothold somewhere.

Her hands clawed into the ground, ripped something out, she

didn't know what, clung tightly. A sharp pain as something drilled first into the tip of her thumb, then between her fingers. She wanted to scream, but she wouldn't let go. In the light of a never-ending succession of lightning, she saw her wet, bloody arms.

Then it was finally over—for a moment. The boat lay free, swaying on the restless, turbulent sea. Above her, tattered ends of the sail blew in the wind, fluttering and hitting remnants of the superstructure.

But much worse was the wall of darkness she saw in front of her while the lights were still flashing. A wave rushed in, several times the height of a man, and was going to smash them all.

Feltif was crouching in the shelter of the small cabin, holding something in his hand, a shiny thing, as big as his face.

The instrument of a god. The very moment D'ihra saw it, the helpless rocking of the boat suddenly stopped, and the wave became smaller and smaller as it raced in. The sight confused her until she realized her mistake. The wave had not become smaller—rather, the *Star Barge* was rising from the water, floating upward. Her boat flew like a bird spreading its wings...

D'ihra raised her hand in front of her face in horror and only felt the pain when she saw the sharp end of the reed stuck in the ball of her hand. Warm, the blood ran down her skin, slowed at the joint, and then dripped to the floor.

Casually, she pulled the reeds out of her flesh and dropped them as she looked over the edge of the ship into the depths. She was not mistaken. The boat was flying.

The wave raced under them, the spray almost touching the hull. A miracle. The work of a god—now Feltif could no longer deny it.

Suddenly, the *Star Barge* descended again, but the worst was over. Smoke rose from the thing in Feltif's hand, and he threw it overboard, shaking his hands. D'ihra followed the direction he had thrown it in and saw where it hit the waves. The water all around it evaporated. The image was seared into her mind; she would not soon forget it.

They managed to sail through storm, wind, and rain until they had left the storm behind. The others did not dare come near Feltif, but D'ihra stood beside him and held out a trembling hand to him, which he grasped.

"I knew who you were from the beginning," she said.

Feltif de Khemrol

The boat was riding the waves again. The night was not over yet, but sleep was of course out of the question.

The Arkonide told himself that he had had no choice, because otherwise he would have died—he and his shipmates. And if he had to let them die according to basic orders instead of using Arkonide technology, then he wouldn't have been acting true to himself.

Harufont and Morokar were still trying to put the scraps of the shredded sails to good use. To Feltif's astonishment, after the first surprise—or horror—no one had asked why they had not flown to the city, not even D'ihra. Moving as they were, they could have long since reached Atlantis.

There were a lot of different answers. That the power of the anti-grav generator would never have been enough was only part of the truth. Even if it had been possible, he would not have done it. He needed time to think before they reached Atlantis. Because as much as he pondered, he could not find a solution to the dilemma he was in. On the one hand, he could not simply abandon these people to their fate. Nor was there any excuse to take them with him to the colony. How could he justify it to the commander? If he broke more rules, he could no longer hope for understanding. Everything had its limits, even Atlan's already inexplicable patience, and this time Feltif de Khemrol was close to crossing that last line.

But was there an alternative? Should he abandon these refugees to the sea or their brutal enemies? Should he, Feltif, deny himself and bow to the rules even though they were deeply repugnant to him?

"How did you recognize me?" he asked D'ihra. They were sitting in the middle of the boat, which had survived the chaos almost intact. Only a part of a side wall was missing, through which the first light of dawn shone. Every now and then a drop of water fell from the intertwined reeds.

She hesitated briefly, as if she had to think, smiling. "Your gaze. The situation. You may have appeared to me in a different form this time, but..."

"It's a mask, nothing more," he interrupted. She probably thought he was a god who could take on any appearance. How

wrong she was. But how could he explain it to her? “It changes my appearance perfectly. You wouldn’t have me—”

“How would I be able to forget the man who saved my life the night my child was born?”

In responding, she addressed a topic he had been thinking about for a long time.

“Where is he?” he asked, though he read in her face that there could only be one terrible answer. One she didn’t want to talk about and he didn’t want to hear. “What happened to your boy?”

“The fighting had been raging for quite a while when the enemies attacked our village.” Her words sounded cold, very different from anything she had said before. There was no trace of life in it; it reminded Feltif of the soulless voice of a primitive robot. “Not many survived. I was not in the cottage when they came. Godwarn, my...the boy’s father, he ran back to get him.”

“I understand. You don’t have to keep talking.”

But she continued to speak as if in a trance, looking into the void. “Some burning arrows and some warriors. No more was needed, and no one was able to prevent it. I saw it, but I... The two of them could...” D’ihra’s voice choked.

“Godwarn and your child didn’t leave the house?” asked Feltif, giving her a chance to end it all with a quick nod.

She did, and she looked infinitely sad, as if the memory almost killed her. “You and yours...surely you don’t have wars?”

The apparent change of topic surprised him. He decided to answer honestly. “We do,” he said quietly, seeing exploding spaceships in his mind’s eye. Arkonide units as well as those of the Methanes, whose destruction he himself was responsible for. “And much worse than yours.”

They discovered Atlantis in the distance, and Feltif de Khemrol saw the city as he had never seen it before. He saw it through the eyes of the people who marveled at the miracles that lay before them.

The shiny metal, the reflective, almost indestructible glass... Materials that the inhabitants of this world did not know. Atlan’s tower, a giant even by Arkonide standards, loomed over everything else. It stood right in front of the cliffs of the coastline. Next to it stretched the artificial lake, over which the summer heat wafted. An arc-shaped water vein touched the edge of the small spaceport

landing field, on which some gliders stood: tears of heaven.

The buildings surpassed each other in ingenuity, as if their architects had made a pact to realize their own grandeur. As if they wanted to prove that they could do more than design typical, albeit occasionally a little extravagant, funnel buildings.

The central recreation area, with its exactly one thousand tiny platforms and boxes, protruded half into the lake on the eastern side. At the same time, it extended over a filigree tube system a few dozen meters in height. In its entirety, it resembled an Arkon crane just rising from the ground, as it only occurred in the lakes of the manorial court. Tarrarin on Zielon: some called her an architectural genius, others a bastard who only ever stepped out of the Emperor's cesspool to reclaim her ancestral place. She had thus built him a monument. One that impressed Feltif, even if he had never liked Zielon. In some behavioral patterns, she actually resembled a maggot, except that she had made it to the top and had never been crushed by a careless foot.

But all these were idle thoughts. They did not help him at all. They approached Atlantis via the sea and would soon reach the invisible threshold where the automated defensive measures took effect. It was easy for simply programmed robot stations to take ships like the *Star Barge* off course with artificial undercurrents and winds.

The people of this world never reached the city, no matter by which route, neither by land nor by sea. From their point of view, either nature or the will of the gods always conspired against them. In reality, it was simple technology, and every single incident increased the rumors of the mythical power of the mysterious residents in the city.

The gods.

And so Feltif was faced with an extremely strange choice. Did he want to be a god in D'ihra's eyes and those of her companions? Or was it his duty to reveal the truth to them once and for all, whether they were able to comprehend it or not?

Next to him, D'ihra looked out into the distance and remained as silent as he was. Her companions still avoided him. They were afraid of him, he knew that. Of the unknown he embodied. Under other circumstances, they probably would have tried to murder him behind the scenes as soon as he showed carelessness. Because he was a stranger, not like them, he frightened them.

D'ihra, on the other hand, came closer and closer to him. Why she trusted him, he did not know. Where did she get the strength that seemed to surpass that of her fellow humans? Because she had met him before? Because, as a seer, she had had contact with higher powers?

In any case, he wondered what source her special abilities came from, or whether they were even real at all. Could she really see into the future? Or was it only based on a socioreligious system and on...deception? Or it could well be possible that she had a special mutant ability.

At this point in his deliberations, he faltered. Of course! Why hadn't he come up with this idea earlier? A psychic ability...an extremely rare phenomenon, and in one of the primitive inhabitants of this world, on which the colony had been established under the direction of the Emperor's son.

D'ihra was not like everyone else. She was precious. Feltif only had to present this fact well enough to justify an exception to the rules before Atlan.

Sometimes the solution was so apparent, yet one was just not able to perceive it because the view was obstructed by all-too-obvious facts. The art was to see the special and true value of a thing or an individual.

"Waves are coming."

Her words tore him out of his thoughts.

"And without any wind," she continued.

Feltif knew what that meant. The robotic defenses were taking effect. His hand ran into the wide pockets of his trousers, enclosing a pulse generator.

"I'll take care of it," he assured her. The decision had been made. He looked D'ihra in the eye. "Wonderland awaits you..."

6.

On the Relativity of a Spectacle
Tarts de Telomar

The deceptive calm ended completely unspectacularly with a message from the scanning officer: “A Methane ship has materialized in the system.”

The words were followed by a moment of silence throughout the bridge. *He sounded almost stunned*, thought Tarts de Telomar, the commander of the *Tosoma*. His ship still lay in the shadow of the insignificant sun near Larsaf’s no less insignificant star, to which the colony of Atlantis gave its only shine. *Amazed that after all this time something is still happening.*

Tarts turned to the strategic outer hologram in the middle of the bridge. “More information!” he demanded.

The scanning officer threw himself into this task with great zeal, as if it were the crowning glory of his career and not pure routine. He rattled off a list of measurement data and distances that the holo transported just as reliably as his words. All in all, it boiled down to a simple denominator, as relieving as it was disappointing: the Methane ship was alone and it posed no danger. Not a warship, but a reconnaissance craft collecting data.

The unit set course for the red dwarf’s third, dead planet.

Should Tarts go on the attack? The small Methane ship didn’t stand a chance against the *Tosoma*. In the event of destruction—the sure outcome of a battle—the danger of the enemies discovering the Arkonide colony would be averted. On the other hand, even in this remote part of the galaxy, there were countless suns, and Larsaf’s star was not too far away...but far enough. The chance that the Methanes would locate Atlantis was slim.

In addition, the reconnaissance craft was an agile ship, more nimble than the *Tosoma*, which also spoke in favor of not attacking, but waiting.

Just as they had been doing this whole time.

Because if the enemy unit escaped after an attack, it would return within a very short time with reinforcements. Then they would no longer have to deal with a randomly roaming reconnaissance craft, but dozens or even hundreds of Methane ships searching the area and ultimately finding Atlantis...and, thanks to their superior power, undoubtedly destroying it.

Everything was predictable, a clear, logical sequence of events, depending on the initial situation Tarts created. Nevertheless, the commander quarreled with himself. Despite all these overly rational theoretical considerations, shouldn't they strike quickly and purposefully? Again, a few enemies less. Again, a scout of the opponents, who would not provide his superiors with important information. Again, a tiny, perhaps insignificant victory for the overall picture which nevertheless remained a victory that could not be argued away.

"Commander?"

Cunor ter Pelgan. Again... And who else? Tarts gave him permission to speak on a shielded frequency. No one on the bridge would be able to follow their conversation.

"Commander, I recommend an attack."

And all this without the question of whether you can speak frankly? "I'm listening."

"I'm thinking about team morale. You know that this factor cannot be neglected."

And because I know, you're pointing it out to me?

"A victory will do them good," Cunor continued.

Tarts knew when he'd received good advice, regardless of what he thought of the person who offered it. As commander of a battleship, he was not allowed to lose another second. "I agree with your assessment." He changed the radio frequency to a general channel. "We're going on the attack."

The *Tosoma* left the shadow of the red dwarf sun, performed a short transition, and fell back into normal space about a thousand kilometers from the enemy ship. An orientation phase lasting a few moments followed, because no pilot, no matter how experienced, could determine the materialization point one hundred percent accurately in relation to such a tiny object as the Methane reconnaissance aircraft.

Cunor ter Pelgan sat, deeply focused, at his holographic

workstation. Tarts didn't have to watch him to know that he was ready to strike with all the battleship's force of arms. The commander gave his weapons officer only a fleeting glance. That was enough.

Mere seconds after the transition, the *Tosoma* fired at the far inferior Methane ship. The protective shield of the reconnaissance craft glowed, becoming a beacon in the blackness of space, brighter than all the distant points of light of the suns that served as the backdrop for this brief spectacle. A necessity that occurred a thousand times and more often in an interstellar war between two space-traveling civilizations.

In the holographic view, Tarts watched as the screen of the enemy ship inflated and turned into a glaring blur for a blink of an eye before imploding. Then, a firestorm blazed in space. The flames shot into the blackness like the prominences of a sun, only to be extinguished forever at the height of their eruption. Heat wafted over the metal of the outer shell of the reconnaissance craft, melted the superstructures of the instruments and the antennae, ate through the fuselage, and exposed the steel intestines.

And now the explosion that destroys everything on board and the ship itself, leaving nothing but tiny fragments and the atoms floating in a vacuum...

But this explosion did not occur. Instead, something happened that, according to the immediate positronic evaluations, had a probability of less than three percent: the Methane reconnaissance craft accelerated and moved away from the chaos. Burning atmospheric gasses chased out of the torn fuselage, which shone and wandered as a fiery trail in the blackness.

Cursing, Tarts enlarged the corresponding section of the hologram, and the detailed data took his breath away. Not only was the burning atmosphere escaping from the ship, but...objects were escaping too. A rotating partition wall with shredded edges. A unit spinning in a vacuum, from which flashover flashes struck. A metallic bowl surrounded by fountains of water that immediately solidified into ice in the cold. And a Methane soldier with a split trunk and spread limbs. The hands seemed to want to reach for something, but they were forever rigid.

"Take up pursuit!" ordered Tarts, struggling to keep calm. To his relief, he had seen with his own eyes how the antennae of the reconnaissance craft had melted. The Methane could not send a

distress call. Nevertheless, there was a risk that they would escape and make direct contact with other ships. Then there would be a real threat.

Meanwhile, the Methane craft accelerated, hurtling towards the third planet, a dark, dead lump of rock. No doubt, the Methanes wanted to hide there, using the rugged mountain ranges for cover before switching to superluminal flight with a lightning start. They needed some time until their transition engines were ready to launch again.

It was all too easy to see through and, unfortunately, Tarts had to admit, had a certain chance of success. The reconnaissance craft was smaller and more maneuverable than the *Tosoma* and thus superior to it so close to a planet.

Cunor ter Pelgan fired again, sending an energetic salvo towards their enemies. The attack fizzled out ineffectively, too far away from the Methanes.

The battleship also raced towards the planet but had to lower its speed to avoid hitting the surface. The reconnaissance craft, although partially destroyed, was able to fly much more daring maneuvers thanks to its smaller mass. It was heading towards a mountain range. The peaks towered close together, with breathtaking gorges and chasms, at the bottom of which dark rock seemed to open the view into a lightless hell.

The distance between hunter and hunted increased with each breath. The scanning officer reported that the Methane reconnaissance craft had flown into a kind of gorge, a narrow opening between two mountain slopes. “Much too narrow to follow!” added the man. He had only come on board right before the start of the current mission. Tarts hardly knew him, but in those moments, this officer did not make a good impression.

Of course, the *Tosoma* could not follow. It would have been a completely pointless, even stupid maneuver. “Ter Pelgan?” asked Tarts.

“I’m ready.”

No questions asked. No unnecessary loss of time. Apparently, his weapons officer knew more about exploiting this situation to his own advantage and had recognized the same opportunity as his commander. Very good.

“Go!” ordered Tarts.

Cunor ter Pelgan fired.

A virtual fiery arc spanned the holographic representation of the external observation between the turrets of the *Tosoma* and the mountains. In the next moment, the projectile hit, detonated...and shredded a summit into a hail of rocks and splinters. In a cloud of dust, a huge avalanche thundered into the depths. Rocks crashed open, dragging further debris with them in a chain reaction.

And all this close to the already badly damaged reconnaissance craft of their enemies. The ship flew straight into the chaos of the rock avalanche. The normal display only transmitted the images to the bridge, as the reconnaissance craft disappeared in an omnipresent cloud of dust. After that, there was nothing left to see. Location data, which was based on more intensive measurements, was still a long time coming.

However, Cunor ter Pelgan, the daredevil, decided to play it safe. He chased another explosive projectile into one of the rugged peaks before the avalanche. Another detonation threw stone and debris in all directions.

This time, the mountains fell apart. A crack burst open, raced, branching, into the depths—exactly in the area where a veritable hail of bombs from the reserves of *Tosoma* fell.

Tarts did not intervene. Even if this whole planet was out of balance and broken, it didn't matter. The bigger the inferno, the more certain it was that their enemies couldn't escape. Disproportionate destructive power wouldn't hurt in this case.

New data was received: the results of the latest scans. An earthquake shook the mountainous region. The explosions apparently affected the planet's fundamental tectonics—unsurprising, given the intensity and frequency of detonations.

A moment later, Tarts thought he couldn't believe his eyes. In the normal image hologram, he saw how some of the peaks...sagged. The entire mountain landscape crashed dozens of meters into the depths.

"An extensive cave system is collapsing," reported Messala on Svenoragk, the science officer. "The soil is no longer load-bearing over long distances!"

Unbelievably large masses of rock disappeared into the planet's depths. Mountains tilted deceptively slowly before their peaks slid and collided with neighboring slopes.

Tarts stared at the hologram. What had he just thought? *It didn't matter if this entire planet disintegrated?* A fleeting thought, a

theoretical consideration. He had never thought it possible that it could actually happen. But now he was witnessing how large parts of a world disappeared in an instant.

It happened in deceptive, almost ghostly silence, transmitted exclusively visually by the holograms. They were safe as spectators on board the *Tosoma*, like barbarians on primitive worlds who delighted in watching gladiators smash each other to pieces in the arena from the safety of their boxes.

A jet of glowing lava shot out of the depths in a fountain. Like a glowing lightning bolt, it shone out of the masses of dust. A beacon of doom.

"I found a higher dimensional explosion in the chaos." Tarts perceived the message as if it had come to him from another world. "By its very nature, it can only come from the final destruction of the Methane craft."

Good, thought Tarts. One last look at the inferno. Whole masses of lava were now boiling there in gigantic lakes. "We are returning to Larsaf III."

His crew cheered as if they had won a decisive battle and narrowly escaped with their lives. For Tarts, it was just another sign of how great the desperation of the men and women actually was. They had destroyed a scout ship that could never have been directly dangerous to them...and they had unleashed an incredible degree of destruction on a planet.

He heard the euphoria, and a thought clearly formed in his mind, drowning out everything else: *We have lost all perspective.*

Nevertheless, he demonstratively joined the jubilation, because Cunor was right: team morale was important.

A little later, as the *Tosoma* flew back towards Atlantis, an even darker reflection dominated his thoughts. Experience had taught him that a Methane ship was never alone. They hadn't located a second ship, but what if there had been one and it had escaped?

It would be their end.

7.

Paths That Cross
Crest da Zoltral

When the *Ektem* materialized in his home solar system, several things happened at once.

What surprised Crest most were his own thoughts. His “home” solar system? This was not Arkon the sun was shining on, but Earth! How could he see this alien star and its planets as home even for a moment? Had he...confused it with Arkon?

Because you’re making a mistake. Your home is not necessarily where you were born. His extra sense dissected his thoughts with its inescapable, sober logic. *Think! Why did you leave Arkon, Crest?*

He didn’t answer, but he wondered how much truth there was in that little moment. And to what extent it had been only a moment of confusion for an old, sick man who worried about how long the effect of the last analgesic ampoule would last.

Commander Demeira on Thanos had initially assigned the three survivors simple quarters, which they were not allowed to leave. Now, she had summoned Crest and the others to a meeting room at the edge of the bridge. There they sat at a round table, the top of which looked as if it had been polished from dark, noble wood. The scepter of the Emperor was used as a pattern on it, a symbol that was still known ten thousand years later.

The commander pointed to a hologram floating above it. Her outstretched index finger almost touched the lower end of the fist-sized ball glowing in the center: Sol, as more and more people were calling the sun that Earth orbited.

On Thanos moved her hand, feeding it to a tiny blue-and-white ball, which was the third planet in orbit. “This is Larsaf III,” she explained unnecessarily. The two inner worlds were not far away. They were currently on the same side of their star, which did not apply to the outer gas giant, Jupiter, which was only half visible at the edge of the three-dimensional image and slowly but steadily

moved out of the detection range.

"Enlarge the third planet!" ordered the positronics commander.

At her command, the blue-and-white sphere zoomed into the center of the hologram and grew in size, as if an imaginary camera were hurtling through space towards Larsaf III—Earth.

The blue formed clearly into the water masses of the seas, the white into cloud clusters that drew a bizarre pattern. In some cases, gray giants appeared on the planet's surface...mountains with rugged stone and covered in snow in the upper regions.

No cities, no industry, no technology, no airplanes, Crest thought. Of course not. Not ten thousand years ago. At that time, there was only one city, only one area with advanced technology on this world: the Arkonide colony.

The camera broke through the clouds and allowed a view of almost the entire hemisphere; ice caps, especially in the northern hemisphere, extended much farther to the equator than he was familiar with from his studies. How might the image affect Tatiana Michalovna, who undoubtedly knew her planet better than he did, who had spent her entire life here until she had passed through the transmitter in the submarine dome?

The camera raced towards a sea: the Atlantic. Waves and scattered storms whipped it up. Crest felt a brief dizziness, as if the ground were being pulled out from under his feet. He felt as if he himself were rushing towards the floods. He saw the area he had come to know as the Sahara some ten thousand years later. At the moment, lush vegetation flourished there, and he believed he recognized buildings, even entire cities, built by primitive means.

In the sea appeared a landmass: vast, untouched nature. A huge, almost circular island, too perfect in shape not to have been consciously shaped. Michalovna groaned.

"What..."

She broke off, much to Crest's relief. He could well imagine how she felt. This huge island should not exist at this point. It was an entire continent that was no longer present on their version of Earth.

The dome, thought the Arkonide. *It is only a pitiful remnant of the colony of my people. A shelter or a research station... Who knows?*

Demeira on Thanos looked at Michalovna. "What?"

"Nothing. I..." The Russian woman faltered.

Don't let anything give you away! Crest thought intently, hoping

that she would read his thoughts or receive them purposefully if he was "loud" enough. *You've never been here before, Tatiana! This planet means nothing to you; it is alien to you!*

"This is the continent of Atlantis," declared the commander of the *Ektem*. "On it lies the Arkonide settlement area of Larsaf III. You look surprised." There was mistrust in her voice, something that could become dangerous.

"I somehow imagined the colony to be bigger," said Michalovna. She sounded as if she could only slowly shake off the surprise, even more the horror. A passable white lie that hopefully convinced Demeira.

The commander showed a contemptuous smile. "Perhaps." She sounded offended.

"My colleague certainly didn't mean to doubt the importance of your mission," Crest claimed. "It is..."

"Enough of that!" said Demeira on Thanos. "Unfortunately, I don't have more to offer. I didn't choose this destination."

"It's enough! We thank you again for our rescue, Commander. We are deeply indebted to you. Arkon will thank you as well. The war-critical research project we are working on..."

"As a gift," she interrupted. "Let's not talk about it anymore."

The *Ektem* landed on Atlantis.

Tarts de Telomar

The air smelled fresh over the lake, infinitely better than inside the *Tosoma*. Insects buzzed above the surface of the water. He observed one of the finger-sized animals with iridescent wings, which they had named Posstan because of its resemblance to a species native to Arkon. It literally danced over the seaweed, suddenly flying towards Tarts. He heard a humming, even felt a slight breeze.

Behind the lake, there was only one eye-catching building: Atlan's tower, a giant of metal and glass crowned by the playful pyramid. The shadow of the tower covered half the water surface. Tarts was standing in the sun, enjoying its warmth.

There was hardly anything to be heard from the other Arkonides, only isolated calls from the platforms of the recreation area. Tarts had carefully chosen a location that was far away.

Everything seemed peaceful.

But this peace was deceptive, the commander of the *Tosoma* felt. Something was in the air. He had been a soldier long enough to have developed a kind of extra sense that allowed him to perceive danger. A quiet skepticism stirred in him, the question of whether he was merely imagining this distant threat; whether it was some sort of sixth sense or perhaps just old age. Perhaps his days were numbered and not those of Atlantis...

He banished doubt from his thoughts. No, it was not the folly of an old man; this was the instinct of a deserving soldier who had experienced hundreds of battles. Tarts de Telomar had sensed it for a long time, but the incident with the Methane reconnaissance craft had been the last straw.

The enemies were lurking just a tiny distance away. Doom could strike at any moment. Perhaps the Methanes had even specifically searched for Atlan. He was the son of the Emperor, one of the most important living Arkonides. His death would be a blow to the Great Empire, his capture the most effective means of pressure Tarts could imagine.

Tarts could literally see it when he closed his eyes: Larsaf III and thus Atlantis were doomed. This colony of his people had no future. That's why he had returned with the *Tosoma* to talk to Atlan in private. The city had to be evacuated! An orderly retreat while it was still possible.

Atlan had known him long enough, he hoped, to believe his words and not dismiss them as crazy. He himself had probably noticed long ago that something was in the air. It was not for nothing that Tarts had always been his companion since the birth of the heir to the throne of Arkon. Atlan—he would be careful not to ever say this out loud—had probably learned more from him than from his father, the Emperor.

Tarts de Telomar had thought about everything carefully on board the *Tosoma*. A confidential conversation with Atlan...if necessary, the threat to resign his command, so that Atlantis would lose the most capable spaceship commander. Words as only he could dare to speak to the Emperor's son...

Yet, no sooner had he reached Larsaf III than all his plans were ruined. And now he stood there by the lake, almost in the shadow of the tower, thinking.

Atlan was no longer in the colony. That was all he had been

told when he landed at the spaceport with the small dinghy: “The commander left Atlantis for an unknown destination.” It was only when Tarts had drilled him that he was finally told that someone would take care of his concerns and meet him.

Tarts had requested this as a meeting place. He wondered whether he should take it as an insult to his intelligence that he had still not been told the name of this ominous someone. If one did not want to offend him completely, there was only one option: Tato Feltif de Khemrol, the governor who had direct authority over Larsaf III. Only Atlan himself was still above him, solely because of his origins.

Footsteps approached from the sunny part of the shore. He turned around. “You are...” he began before realizing that he was not facing Feltif as expected, but his deputy, Kosol ter Niidar.

A miracle they didn’t send a completely unimportant administrative official from the third rank, Tarts thought angrily. Not a good prerequisite for his plan to change the impending fate of Atlantis.

Kosol greeted him almost casually, with the least amount of etiquette that protocol allowed. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man whose unusually bright red eyes always looked as though they were shining. He probably helped with special lenses or a gel; the result was that anyone who looked him in the eye once never forgot him.

“Don’t hold it against me,” said Tarts, “but I was expecting the Tato personally.”

“Feltif de Khemrol is...indisposed.”

Tarts could imagine what that meant. “He left Atlantis again?”

“Certainly. But not with our revered Commander Atlan, who is currently no longer in this solar system.”

In front of them, the surface of the water began to move. A fist-sized, gray-earthed animal jumped out of the damp grass and landed half in the water. It blew open a throat bag and made a croaking sound. The locals referred to it as a frog, Tarts casually recalled. Tato had told him that one day during a dinner prepared from the legs of such animals.

Delicious.

“So Feltif de Khemrol is back on the planet?” asked Tarts. “With the barbarians?”

“Indeed.” Kosol ter Niidar tilted his head and looked up at the top of the tower across the lake. His almost waist-length white hair

was twisted into a braid that was draped sideways over his shoulder. “With the approval of Commander Atlan himself.” He didn’t sound pleased.

Tarts was no different in this respect. A conversation with Atlan was also urgently needed in this context. But at the moment there were more important things. He had to find out more about the commander’s disappearance. Or about his mission, whatever one wanted to call it. “Listen to me carefully. I need to know what happened to Atlan. Did he go through the…transmitter?” He watched the reaction of his counterpart closely.

Kosol was not surprised; he obviously knew what Tarts was talking about. “In this respect, whether to your relief or disappointment, I can answer no.”

Why so long-winded? Tarts wondered. “You saw the transmitter?”

“I know the commander has been fascinated by the device since Kerlon brought it back from his reconnaissance flight to a nearby system.”

Again, Kosol formulated his words in a similarly awkward way, probably to cover up his lack of more accurate information. *A nearby system.* A vague, vague statement. Tarts disregarded the comment. He had explicitly warned his foster son, Atlan, against entrusting himself to this unimaginably alien technology. No one knew what happened to someone who passed through a transmitter.

“The commander,” Kosol continued, “left Atlantis on the *Tosoma IX* instead.”

Tarts closed his eyes briefly. “Were the repairs completed before leaving?” Of course, Tarts knew the history of the auxiliary craft of his own battleship, which had remained on Larsaf III because of its poor condition.

“I don’t know anything about that,” Kosol replied to his disappointment. “Only that the *Tosoma IX* was capable of flight and maneuverability, which I can confirm.”

“Who accompanied Atlan? Why did he leave the solar system?”

“He went alone.” Kosol ter Niidar raised his hand defensively. “Before you say anything, the commander insisted and you know he is entitled to give that order. Neither I nor anyone else can dissuade him from making such a decision.”

It was on the tip of Tarts’s tongue to argue that, for example, Atlan was usually open to meaningful advice…but he bit his tongue.

He didn't want to interrupt Kosol's talkativeness.

Again, the frog croaked.

"He didn't tell anyone about his goal. The commander merely stressed that he had to go. He saw an opportunity to end the war with the Methanes."

"He wants to negotiate?" said Tarts incredulously. He knew Atlan as a clear, sober thinker, not as a dreamer who indulged in vague illusions. There may have been opponents who were open to negotiations, especially after a long period of war, but the Methanes definitely weren't.

To his relief, Kosol said no. "I don't think he was in the mood for that. He has also assured us that he will come back tomorrow."

Tarts didn't like that. Not at all.

"One moment, please," he said abruptly. He looked out over the lake, his gaze fixed on nothingness.

Only then did Tarts notice the small radio receiver in Kosol's auricle. Apparently, he was listening to a radio message. Was the next bad news already lurking around the corner?

Screams rang out from the recovery platform, and suddenly Tarts wondered if it was far too late for the evacuation he had in mind. And what if the Methanes were already approaching? Oppressively real, he saw in his mind's eye how the platforms of the huge artificial crane, which had just lifted off the ground, went up in flames under enemy fire; how explosions shredded the filigree retaining linkage; how dozens of Arkonides plunged screaming many meters into the depths.

But of course, it didn't happen. The screams actually came from a boisterous celebration. Moreover, Kosol would not have been the first to learn of the arrival of the Methanes; the *Tosoma* was in orbit around Larsaf III, and he, as the commander of the battleship, would be notified immediately.

"Good news, Tarts." Kosol ter Niidar snapped him out of his thoughts. "We're finally getting the supplies and spare parts we've been waiting for."

"The convoy has arrived? Why so late?" Tarts was apparently far less optimistic about this news than his counterpart.

"I can't tell you anything about that yet. Ask the commander personally."

"Who is leading the convoy?"

"Demeira on Thanos."

Tarts turned away. “I’ll talk to her.”

Demeira on Thanos

So this was Atlantis, the colony that the son of the Emperor himself led. Certainly, a magnificent city with extravagant architecture, Demeira could not deny that. Nevertheless, she wondered what might have driven His Majesty to not only found a colony in such a remote place, but also appoint his own son as its commander.

Perhaps she asked herself this question just to distract herself as she hurried through the main corridor on the treadmill through the middle spherical shell, towards the largest hangar of her ship. Because the commander of the *Ektem* and the associated convoy felt anything but comfortable in her skin.

Pull yourself together!

Ignoring the sharp rebuke of her extra sense, she focused on her rapid run and on breathing deeply and evenly. For such platitudes, she would not have had to go through the procedure of activation.

Now it remains to be seen whether it was really wise to respond to the distress call and reach their destination even later.

It was worth it. Demeira was convinced. If only to feel alive, to follow her own decisions and not a rigid set of rules.

For an old Arkonide in poor condition, a humanoid, and a lizard creature? For three figures whose story logically does not fully satisfy me?

Sometimes she was tired of arguing with herself, especially since in such situations her extra sense only reflected and reinforced her own skepticism anyway. It always emphasized the negative. There were moments when she wondered if all her disdainful thoughts had gathered and isolated themselves in it. A gloomy reflection of her character, so to speak.

A ridiculous theory that contradicts current research on the extra sense of the Arkonides.

Who knows who dominates this common research?

What do you mean by that?

Do you believe that science brings objective truths to light or that knowledge must always be filtered and interpreted? And this from those who study such science? From Arkonides with extra senses activated,

usually?

You're talking nonsense.

You may be right.

This was one of the typical thought conversations that she only confirmed in theory, no matter how unusual and how nonconforming she might be. She focused her thoughts on the essentials. The visit had been announced: Tarts de Telomar was on his way to the *Ektem*. His craft was probably docking at that moment. Of course, Demeira had heard of him—who didn't know him? The man to whom the Emperor had entrusted his son? The one who went in and out of the court, who had taught Atlan everything from childhood and had more influence in the Great Empire than almost anyone else?

Tarts enjoyed a good reputation; he knew how to avoid being drawn into intrigues and the social gossip of the powerful. For Demeira, he was the image of a wise, learned man who knew the pitfalls of life and had been shaped not least through many battles.

Then talk to him about the nature and usefulness of an extra sense.

She did not begrudge her extra sense its answer but thought that she would hardly have the opportunity to do so. She would be happy if she managed to justify her rescue mission without it having any consequences for her career. Because as much as she appreciated Tarts, it couldn't be good to have him as an opponent.

"Life cannot be determined by theory alone," she said a little later, after she had greeted her distinguished guest in the hangar according to etiquette and paid him the honor. Tarts de Telomar had come unaccompanied, just like her. She was amazed at how old he looked; on all the holoimages she knew, he had seemed more virile.

"That's why it's called...life," he replied. "It always has an unexpected twist in store. But what are you getting at?" His voice sounded sharp, and even if she could see his age, his whole posture seemed tight, his every movement targeted and powerful. "Leave the introduction and get to the point. I'm glad and I congratulate you on leading the convoy to its destination unscathed, but you are long overdue."

Demeira remained completely calm as she crossed the hangar with her guest and supervisor. "There were technical problems. And we've rescued shipwrecked people from the Methanes."

The old Arkonide was silent, but she watched him closely. His pupils widened, and his eyeballs glistened with excitement. “You did what?”

“During a stop, while the transition engines were regenerating, we picked up a distress call.”

Tarts de Telomar stopped. “And as commander of a convoy, nothing else occurred to you but to take care of the source of this distress call?”

Exactly. But she suppressed the first word that came to mind. Her answer had to be weighed carefully. A lot depended on it—perhaps her future in the Arkonide military. “I analyzed the situation and came to the conclusion that—”

“There are very clear guidelines for such a case.” His voice still sounded dangerously low, but Demeira felt the anger boiling within him.

“At that moment out there in space was...”

“Are you aware of those guidelines, Commander on Thanos?”

“Of course. Nevertheless, I decided otherwise.”

He stretched out the flat of his hand: *Be silent!* “Then let me say it in a nutshell. You risked the lives of tens of thousands for a handful of shipwrecked people. Your mission was to transport supplies to this colony.”

Demeira looked around. A group of workers and engineers attended to auxiliary craft parked at the other end of the hangar. No one else was within sight or earshot. Good. No one had to follow this conversation. Tarts was still standing in his seat, not looking like he was moving until this matter was fully resolved, which couldn’t end well for her.

What should she say? Finish speaking? No. Justifications? No. If she wanted to pull her head out of this noose, she had to do it differently.

Understanding. Her extra sense sent it on impulse. *Get him to understand why you did this. Whether he will admit it or not, there have undoubtedly been situations in his life where he has thought the same way.*

But what if he never pursued such considerations? If he saw it as a kind of heresy and banished it from his mind?

The mental dialogue was almost instant. This was one of the advantages of an activated extra sense; one always had a dialogue partner and advisor at hand who could be consulted

inconspicuously even during a conversation. It just took some practice to focus on two things at once. Among the female cadets in the years of their training, there was a saying that this ability had been instilled in women in the cradle, while men would probably never learn it.

"Commander," said Tarts de Telomar. "Tell me one thing: how many have you saved?"

"Three people." That was not a good answer, but it was the only possible one. She had to stick to the truth that her counterpart could easily verify. "A few hundred Arkonides of high rank, among them the Emperor" would have sounded better.

"People?" he asked. "I hope you're at least talking about Arkonides?"

"One Arkonide, two—"

"Enough! Take me to them. Immediately!"

"They are—"

"Not a word more! Not a single word! I want to see them. And for your sake, Commander on Thanos, I hope that these three people are under arrest and heavily guarded. Did it ever occur to you that they might be Methane agents?"

"I—"

His hand twitched towards her face, and for a moment she thought he was going to hit her. But his outstretched index finger stopped a few millimeters in front of her lips. "What do you not understand about 'Not a word more'? I do not care whether this is your ship, Commander, or not! I am above you in rank, and I can crush you with a single command if it comes to my mind. Don't force me to do it, and be glad that this conversation took place in private and not in front of your crew. And now, take me to the rescued people!"

Despite the humiliation, Demeira kept a clear head and did not allow herself to be provoked any further. She only wondered which of them felt greater anger at that moment and where Tarts's visibly bad mood came from.

She silently gestured for her guest to follow her and made her way to the quarters she had assigned to the Arkonide Crest da Zoltral and his companions. She was annoyed that she had ordered minimal security, but unfortunately, it could not be changed now.

Her first minutes on Atlantis hadn't gone well. But she still had a trump card to play: the secret mission of the Emperor himself.

Crest da Zoltral

Time passed agonizingly slowly. Since reaching Atlantis, Crest, Tatiana Michalovna, and Trker-Hon had had to stay in their quarters. The commander had announced that she would report as soon as she could.

"Our fate is being decided," said the telepath. "Right? And in the meantime, we have no choice but to sit around here passively."

Crest gave her a narrow smile. "Almost."

"Almost?"

"You're not sitting. You're pacing."

Tatiana stopped in front of the wall facing the front door. In fact, she had turned incessantly round after round, probably to give her inner tension and nervousness at least a makeshift outlet. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

Just as the Arkonide was considering how to answer, Trker-Hon unexpectedly gave him support: the Topsidan burst into barking laughter, a sound Crest had never heard before.

Tatiana looked at him in amazement. His little lizard eyes almost disappeared into the scales of the face as his muzzle twitched rhythmically, and his red tongue darted in and out. Then the Russian laughed along, and for a moment, Crest also forgot all his worries.

Suddenly, the door opened and silence immediately returned.

"Someone wishes to see you," said Demeira on Thanos, whose gaze clearly showed confusion and painstakingly suppressed anger.

The commander entered without further request; she could afford this luxury on her ship. She was followed by a tall Arkonide, certainly even older than Crest. Without medical refreshers, he would probably no longer be able to lead an active life. Crest's extra sense confirmed this impression. It was possibly a valuable piece of information for further conversation. Whoever this man was, he could give orders to the commander of the *Ektem*. Was this the commander of the colony? "The immortal"? Did the nature of his refreshers go far beyond what Arkonide or related medicine was capable of? The thought electrified Crest. Was he closer to his goal than expected?

"My name is Tarts de Telomar," said the other in a tone as if

everyone must know him.

Crest hesitated. This man may have been a first-degree celebrity, but ten thousand years in the past, in an era from which not much more than the names of the emperors had been handed down. No doubt Tatiana was already reading his thoughts. He looked at the telepath, and she nodded inconspicuously.

"Commander on Thanos saved you three," de Telomar continued. "Tell me your story. And stick to the truth, Arkonide." He did not give the others even a meager glance.

Crest repeated what he had already told Demeira on Thanos. Again he mentioned the war-critical research and the attack of the Methanes, followed by the escape that only he and his two companions had survived.

"I don't believe a word of it," replied Tarts de Telomar harshly. "Your *story* cannot be proven."

"The commander already has a hypercom message to Arkon..."

"You know as well as I do that an answer will take days. The stakes are too high. You will leave Atlantis with the convoy as soon as it has unloaded its goods and is ready for departure."

Every word struck Crest like a stab in the heart. They could not allow that to happen. They had come surprisingly closer to immortality, or at least to an immortal, the commander of this colony in the past. Someone who knew more about the Planet of Eternal Life and could confirm that it was not just a myth.

"Are you the commander of Atlantis?" asked Crest.

Tarts de Telomar leaned forward. His upper lip twitched, exposing some teeth. "No," he said, laboriously controlled. "So you're really saying you don't know me? That you don't know Atlan himself leads this colony? Well, then I'll tell you one thing: I have the authority to make that decision, and I'm not going to bother the commander with it."

Crest put the fingertips of his hands together. "I do not doubt your competence, but I must ask to speak to Atlan."

Suddenly, Tarts de Telomar's hand clawed into Crest's shoulder. The fabric of his outer garments stretched; the nails pressed painfully on the shoulder bones. "I'm not going to waste the time of the Emperor's son on a few good-for-nothings who should have died! Am I making myself clear?"

The son of the Emperor.

So they were in the presence of greatness. The Emperor himself

had sent his son to lead a colony on Larsaf III, on Earth? Crest sensed a big secret, and it became increasingly clear that they were indeed on the right track.

The Earth…this Arkonide settlement far in the past…the dome on the seabed that survived the millennia…the traces of immortal DNA…the transmitter…the unexpected and inexplicable victory of the Arkonides over the Methanes at some point in the future from this time…the Emperor and his son…it was all connected.

Crest was on the verge of gaining insight into the true background, into the games of power that came from the court on Arkon himself. At the same time, however, he was threatened with having to leave this intersection of events. His hands were tied, and if Tarts de Telomar decided that the "prisoners"—that was exactly what the three time travelers were to him—should be removed, there was no way to stop him.

Or was there?

Crest was allowed to—had to—make allusions to attract the attention of his counterpart. To speak of the Planet of Eternal Life? From the future, in which this all-determining war was long gone?

Another preceded him. Without being asked, Michalovna took the floor. "Tarts de Telomar, we need to talk to you. Without anyone listening." She turned her gaze on the commander of the *Ektem*.

Finally, the old Arkonide let go of Crest's shoulder. "So? Do you have to? Why should I grant you this request?"

Tatiana pointed meaningfully to Demeira on Thanos. "I can't tell you here."

The commander of the *Ektem* stiffened. "It's hardly…"

She fell silent as Tarts de Telomar whirled around, raised his arm, and pointed at her with his hand outstretched. "I'm not ready to play any games! I have already decided on this matter! Is that clear? One more word from you…" He pointed to Tatiana. "And I will have you shot."

Be quiet, Tatiana! Crest thought urgently. *He's serious!*

But the Russian did not remain silent and thus sealed her fate. "Ronjano IV," she said.

Tarts de Telomar froze. "Get them out of here!" he commanded sharply. "All of them!"

"Commander?" asked Demeira on Thanos, confused.

"Leave this area! And take the prisoners with you! But not the

woman! Immediately!”

Demeira on Thanos obeyed and so did Trker-Hon. Crest also left. The last thing he saw was a fine smile on Tatiana’s lips.

“One more thing!” cried Tarts de Telomar. “If you eavesdrop on this room, Commander, I will find out and have you eliminated. Am I clear?”

8.

In Wonderland
Feltif de Khemrol

Feltif sent his personal identification code, which immediately switched off the defenses. The robotic systems no longer ensured that the boat was drifting from its course to Atlantis, but pulled it by tractor beam to the shore of the city.

It was thus clear that there was no turning back for the Tato. Feltif had defied all reason and brought people of this planet to the colony. Only a few hundred meters separated them from the outskirts of the city.

He left the *Star Barge* with D'ihra, followed by her brother, then Morokar and Harufont. Five of them stood in the reed grass of the remote pier. Feltif hoped that no one had watched their arrival.

"You seek refuge in this settlement," he said to the four guests. "I do not deny you this request, but there are restrictions that I must now explain to you. I am an inhabitant of this city that bears the name Atlantis. I know that you think I am a god, but you are mistaken in this assessment. I will show you..."

"No," interrupted Harufont, who was closest to him. "You will do nothing, stranger. We thank you for saving our lives at sea. With that, we part ways. You and this city, you stand for something that we..." He faltered, probably looking for the right word.

Egmogast, D'ihra's brother with the heavy tongue, made some sounds. Feltif did not understand the meaning of those stammered syllables. The others looked perplexed as well, and only D'ihra shook her head slightly. "You're right, Egmogast. It is true that you cannot understand it, but it is far from all. You are afraid because he's a stranger! But he and this city... Therein lies the future for us! Here we will find refuge from the war that has killed so many of our people."

"That may be true for you, seer, but not for us." Harufont demonstratively took a step back, standing between Egmogast and

Morokar. “We will not enter the city.”

“Just because of your fear? Will you let it define you?”

Again Egmogast said something, this time longer; again, Feltif de Khemrol did not understand a word of it. The result was that D’ihra turned away from her brother. “I’m sorry.” She looked in the direction of the city. Atlan’s tower loomed over everything. From this angle, it looked like a bizarrely steep, confusingly narrow, and smooth mountain. It had to appear threatening to them, but D’ihra showed no fear.

“What are you going to do?” asked Feltif.

“Don’t worry about us,” Harufont demanded. “We’re leaving your city behind. If we are lucky, we are far enough away from our enemies and their war. Our life begins anew at this moment, and we will see where it leads us.”

Feltif nodded, a gesture that he had adopted from the people of this world. “D’ihra, are you sure you don’t want to go with them? You owe me nothing.” And yet the thought that she could leave him hurt. “Your brother and his friends, on the other hand, are your life.”

“You’re wrong,” she said in a soft voice. “They were. Didn’t you hear it? They have chosen to start a new life. But I will go on with my own life and see where it takes me.” She hesitated for a moment, and then added, “By your side.”

D’ihra looked for a long time at the spot where the three men had disappeared between the trees. Feltif radioed a robot-controlled glider. Along with D’ihra, he boarded the aircraft. She showed surprisingly little shyness, as if technology like this were not completely foreign to her.

“I’ve decided,” she said, only when he asked, “I will accompany you...and I want to see your wonderful city, which is the reason I set out in the *Star Barge* in the first place. For this, it is necessary to accept some things as they are.”

“It’s not my city,” he replied.

“But you live in it.”

He closed his eyes briefly. Why should he remain silent? Why not say more? The last frontier had long since fallen anyway. “I am the Tato of the colony,” Feltif declared. “In a way, a...a rector. But someone else has even more power than I do.”

“A priest?” she asked. “Or the First Warrior?”

“Warrior...” he repeated thoughtfully.

“You said you know battles like we do, only worse. So there must be warriors among your kind.”

“The soldiers play an important role, yes. Our leader, however, is...” He broke off. How could he explain it? Political structures in the Great Empire had grown over a long period of time. Atlan’s importance as commander and son of the million-eyed emperor, His Majesty, could not be summed up in a few words.

“What’s his name?” she asked.

“He is called Atlan and is the son of a far more powerful man from a realm upon which the light of other stars falls.” He pointed at the sky. “From my homeland.”

“You’re afraid I won’t be able to understand what you’re saying,” D’ihra said. She was a smart woman, there was no question about it. “But I’ve been thinking about these things for two years. Since you told me you came from the stars.”

“You believe me?”

“A god or a man from the stars—that says nothing about what it means that you came into my life, and for a second time.”

Feltif steered the glider to the outskirts of the city. “I have also thought about this fact for a long time.”

“To what end?”

“None,” he admitted.

“So there are limits for you too. Answers that are denied to you.”

“More than you can imagine.” Because the deeper a people like the Arkonides went into space, the more questions opened up before them. Each answer brought with it more secrets. Every revelation made it clear that there was an intricate, hidden being of the cosmos. Perhaps this was one of the reasons Feltif was so attracted to the people of this world. To D’ihra. Because she had no idea of those secrets of the universe and creation.

Because she was like a child who was amazed and therefore possibly smarter than everyone else.

“D’ihra?”

Feltif entered a command into the glider’s control panel, which darkened the viewing windows all around. No one could now see in from the outside and therefore could not see his human passenger. From the inside, however, the panes remained transparent.

“Yes?”

“I’ll take you to my house.” He entered their destination into the autopilot memory.

“So that no one will discover me?”

He hesitated.

“I’ve known for a long time that you’re doing something forbidden by bringing me here.” She leaned back in the armchair, which had to be softer and more comfortable than anything she had touched before. “Are you taking a big risk?”

Without hesitation, Feltif told her the truth, adding, “But I would make the same decision again.”

“Why?”

“Because you open up my view of my world in a completely new way.”

“Then show it to me before we reach your house. Show me Atlantis.” She put her hand on his knee.

He looked at her. Her eyes were tired but full of curiosity. *She is not curious and looking for wonders simply for the pleasure of enjoying it, but rather because she wants to know how it all works. How there can be buildings whose material she does not know and which are many times larger than anything she has ever seen.*

Her hand was warm.

“I agree,” he said.

An acoustic command switched off the autopilot. Feltif steered the glider over the houses of Atlantis. He showed D’ihra some funnel constructions and emphasized that this was a common method in his homeland.

“Why do you choose such a complicated form?” she asked. “The upper areas curve outwards, so that the lower floors can hardly support them. My people have a saying, Feltif.”

“Tell me.”

“If you do not build your house from the cellar vault, it will collapse. If you build it on the wrong surface, like on sand, it will sink and break.” She pointed out of her side window, where a funnel building hung half over an abyss. “But you don’t act like that. And it’s done on purpose, no? Because you are smarter and stronger than the laws nature wants to impose on you. Because you have risen up and do not want to be determined by circumstances.”

She was truly an amazing woman. What would the other Arkonides say to this train of thought from a barbarian?

“Is that why you think we are wise?” he asked.

She smiled. “To have to prove that one can accomplish something may well testify to prudence. Or pride.”

Feltif put his hand on hers. “You convince me more and more that my people need those like you to show them who they are.”

“This city is wonderful, Feltif,” she hastened to say, “but not in all respects better than my homeland.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Our village also stood on the coast before our enemies burned it down.” Her fingers clawed around his knee briefly, her nails pressing into his flesh before she relaxed again with a slight sigh. A shiver ran through his entire leg. “We protected ourselves from the waves and storms by building in an elevated place and erecting a dam. Your houses are not protected.”

“Yes, D’ihra, they are, but in a different way. You just can’t see it.”

Her hand moved higher on his thigh. “I want to know more.” Even higher. “Later!”

Feltif pulled the glider over the usual flight path, into a waiting position, and kissed her.

He finished the city tour according to her wishes later, and they only reached his house on the outskirts of the city, where the untouched forests began, after it had grown dark.

9.

Until the Downfall
Crest da Zoltral

Commander Demeira on Thanos looked stunned. She had not only been sent out of the room by Tarts de Telomar on her own ship, but also directly threatened. Things in Atlantis were obviously not going well, as was likely the case with every society whose members had been bled dry by a cruel war for many years.

Crest could imagine what was going on in those moments in the rooms that had originally been assigned to him and his companions. Michalovna had read Tarts's thoughts and discovered a secret in them that she had hinted at with "Ronjano IV"—presumably the name of a planet where something had happened that no one else knew about.

The telepath had made a good choice; it had been enough to get his attention. His threat to have Tatiana eliminated at the next word had thus become obsolete.

Trker-Hon stayed in the background and remained inconspicuous, as he had done since they had boarded the *Ektem*. As the visibly exotic member of the group, he surely did not want to be drawn into the power games and disputes of the Arkonides. Crest understood this all too well and thought it a smart move.

It wasn't long before the door opened again. Tatiana stood in the doorway, a satisfied smile on her lips.

"Crest! Trker-Hon! Please come in."

Demeira on Thanos gasped but otherwise remained silent. It was a hard blow for her to be passed over in such a way.

"Don't worry," the telepath told her. "This is not because of what's happening. It has nothing to do with you." She hesitated briefly. "Certainly not."

Crest felt as if he had heard only half of a dialogue. It was probably the same as if the commander's parts of the conversation had been conducted purely mentally, which left her completely

confused. He gave way to Trker-Hon and closed the door behind him.

Tarts de Telomar stood in the room, his arms crossed in front of his chest. Above the bridge of the nose, star-shaped wrinkles stretched to the middle of his forehead. They cast shadows over his white brow. “Your companion convinced me to give you another moment of my time. However, I want to be fair and tell you something in advance. How do you know about Ronjano IV?” With a rapid movement, he pulled out a beamer and demonstratively removed it. “This is not a game. It never was. You are encroaching on subjects that are nobody’s business.”

Crest was relieved that Tarts wasn’t aiming at him or any of his companions. “We know that. Your secret is safe with us.” With those last words, he was on slippery ground, since he did not know the slightest thing about it. It didn’t interest him either. Tatiana’s initiative had long since fulfilled its purpose of being able to talk to the mighty Arkonide undisturbed.

“So, what do you have to tell me?” asked Tarts de Telomar. “About yourself or about...whatever.”

Tatiana looked at Crest questioningly, and he nodded at her briefly. She was supposed to speak because she knew the most about her counterpart.

“This colony is doomed,” the telepath announced.

For a moment, the words floated in the room as a gloomy promise. For seconds, their future hung in the balance...then Tarts de Telomar laughed.

“Well, is that all? For a moment, I actually thought you could tell me something of interest. But you only have generalities to offer. Of course this colony will perish. Just like all the worlds of Arkon on the periphery. Any creature that carries a brain in its skull and uses it to store more than protein can figure that out. You’re wasting my time!” He made the beamer disappear again, a clear sign that he no longer took his prisoners seriously. “No matter what you say, it won’t surprise me anymore.”

Trker-Hon attracted everyone’s attention by hitting the ground several times with his lizard tail in rapid rhythm. A scraping sound followed. “Wait, Commander! There is a misunderstanding. We do not suspect that this colony will perish. We don’t predict it either. We know it.”

Tarts raised his right hand and kneaded his chin with his thumb

and forefinger, deliberately making himself vulnerable, as it would take him a long time to get to his weapon, despite his provocative words. “You’re sure of that because the Methanes you’re in leagues with told you?”

“You’re wrong.” The Topsidan took a step towards the ancient Arkonide. His pounding was the only sound in the room but for the scratching of his tail scales on the floor. “You are a clever man, Tarts de Telomar. You know we’re not who we say we are.”

“Life has taught me to be suspicious. Especially in times like these. It prevents an untimely death. So don’t underestimate me, because as you can see, I’ve reached a handsome age.”

“Which you could only achieve by cell refreshments at the highest level of Arkonide medicine,” Crest surmised. “How many times have you been treated?”

Tarts whirled around. “Do you really want to talk about that, you fool?”

Not yet! But it lays the groundwork for what is to come. Crest remained silent, leaving Trker-Hon to speak. The first step was taken; now the truth had to be revealed.

The Topsidan stopped close to Tarts. “You’re right. Our story was a lie. But we’re not who you think we are.”

“Would a Methane spy admit who he is?” The words of the old Arkonide were dripping with sarcasm.

“We know that this colony called Atlantis will perish because we come from the future.”

The corners of Tarts’s mouth twitched. “You’re saying…what?”

So, we managed to surprise him after all. To pull the rug out from under his feet.

“We come from your future,” Trker-Hon continued in a calm voice, completely sober and in the tone of a man who knew exactly what he was saying. “Ten thousand Larsaf years, to give you an idea. The Methanes will soon attack the colony. This entire continent will sink into the sea.”

“I am a human from this planet,” Michalovna added. “At the time of my birth, Atlantis has long been a distant myth around which many legends revolve. No one seriously believes anymore that this continent actually existed. And that’s to say nothing of the aliens who colonized it.”

Tarts de Telomar pulled out the beamer again in an astonishingly rapid movement and lifted it. Everything in Crest

stiffened until he secured the weapon and made it disappear back into its holster. He had previously kept it ready to fire and had undoubtedly been ready to fight at any moment. What had he said? This wasn't a game? Yet he played with such mastery...

"Tell me more!" he demanded tonelessly.

"In my day," said Crest, "the state of the Great Empire is...very different from now. Our people, Commander, are under a fatal influence and withdrawing more and more from reality. There are exceptions, but you wouldn't recognize the once-proud Arkonides, who are sinking into fictional games and mentally slipping away from reality."

"We passed through a transmitter," Michalovna added. "In a deep-sea dome, which is the only thing left of Atlantis in our time. It must have been built off the coast."

"Kosol's dome?" asked Tarts skeptically.

"It will be rediscovered in ten thousand years," Crest said. "And if we go through the transmitter, it will take us back in time. A journey through time that ultimately leaves us stranded here."

The telepath spoke again. "The legends of Atlantis will never fall silent; the memory lives on. But above all is the memory of the catastrophe of doom. In a single day and a single night, they say. My people don't know what it means. No one could imagine how an entire continent could sink into the sea. But I can now: an attack by the Methanes who come with a fleet and launch a bombardment."

"We know of two survivors from that time," Trker-Hon said. "One is the nameless commander of the colony, who has handed down a report by means of a primitive scroll."

"What is Atlan da Gonozal supposed to have done? Do you have any evidence?"

Crest felt tears of excitement come to the corners of his eyes. Atlan da Gonozal... Was that the immortal they were looking for? "We..." he hesitated. The scroll had been lost on its rocky road to the world of immortality. "Unfortunately not," he said quietly.

"That's what I thought! And who would be the second survivor?"

"A man named Cunor."

"Cunor?" Tarts de Telomar laughed, cold and humorless. "My officer ter Pelgan? What happens to the colonists?"

"Regarding your officer...it is possible. We only know his first name. The fate of the colonists is completely unknown to us," Crest

admitted.

"What is my fate?"

"We can't say that either."

"Because you fear a time paradox if I know my future?"

"Because we don't know anything about it."

Tarts was silent, and Crest wondered at how calmly the old Arkonide took it all in. Unfortunately, there was an explanation for his behavior a moment later.

Tarts pushed Trker-Hon aside and hurried towards the exit. "I was wrong about you. You are not traitors or agents of the Methanes, but poor, confused souls. I hope they will help you on Arkon and heal your state of mind. You have my sympathy."

Crest felt as if he had been punched in the stomach. They had risked and lost everything. Tarts thought they were crazy.

It was over.

Their last chance was lost.

Not yet! his extra sense spoke up. *You can get him where it's personal!*

"Tarts," Crest exclaimed, without thinking, "please, stay!"

The old Arkonide, already just outside the door, turned around. "The time I was able to devote to three meaningless prisoners rescued from space is long gone. Eventually, I'll find out how you learned my secret. I advise you never to talk about it."

Crest was not distracted or intimidated. "I want to ask you one last question. Have you never been surprised that your squadron was ordered to this worthless sector of the galaxy? Why was a colony ever founded here?"

Tarts laughed derisively. "You tell me."

"Because this planet is the key to life's greatest mystery. Immortality!"

Tarts de Telomar

Tarts tried again to make his laughter sound as mocking as possible. "Immortality?"

"Do you know it?" asked the woman named Tatiana Michalovna, who claimed to have been born on this planet ten thousand years in the future. She did in fact look like a human being of this world, but that did not sufficiently support the absurd

story.

"What?" asked Tarts.

"The path to the Planet of Eternal Life?"

He felt the desire to flee the room, but he forced himself to leave with calm, orderly movements. "Enough!" he exclaimed as he slammed the door behind him.

It did not surprise him that he did not find the commander of the ship there. In her place, he would not have waited in the corridor either. Not after he had humiliated her so much, and in an environment where she was used to making all the important decisions without anyone contradicting her.

Instead, a simple soldier approached him. Tarts searched in vain for a rank insignia.

"Where may I take you?" the soldier asked.

If only he knew. He had to admit that he could no longer think clearly. He still thought he heard the voice of the human woman:

Do you know it? The path to the Planet of Eternal Life?

"Take me to the hangar. Make sure that I am not disturbed on the way and can think in peace. And tell the commander that I wish to speak with her."

The soldier acknowledged the order and left. Tarts followed him. He would have found the way on his own, but a one-man escort was perfect, so that he could better indulge his thoughts.

This madman Crest spoke of immortality, of the fact that the colony existed only for that reason, in this remote place of all places. Larsaf III would point the way to the greatest mystery of all.

Ridiculous!

And yet, the Emperor had sent his own son to this distant place to take care of the colony. Did His Majesty know something that no one else did? He was the most powerful man in the galaxy, or at least that's what the Arkonides liked to claim. But the galaxy was vast and had by no means been completely explored, however far-reaching the Great Empire was. Could there be such a secret at court without Tarts knowing about it? And if so, was it possible that Atlan had concealed it from him?

Do you know it? The path to the Planet of Eternal Life?

Who were these people? Time travelers? Really? It was too absurd to think possible. On the other hand, Tarts had seen many things in his long life that he had not wanted to believe.

They had to be crazy. But they didn't seem crazy. They had

proceeded systematically, were perfectly coordinated. And that terse talk of immortality...

The words had gripped him deeply. He was an old man. Only his sense of duty kept him from finally dying—and the medical treatments that this Crest had so perceptively recognized. Tarts knew death was near; he felt its cold breath coming closer each day. Until now, he hadn't minded, since death was the goal towards which every life aspired, and he had long defied it, decades longer than most in his position before him. He knew death; he had encountered it often enough during the war.

But now suddenly the thought arose that death may not be inevitable. And as ludicrous as it sounded, it wouldn't let him go.

Do you know it?

The soldier entered an anti-grav lift in front of him. Immersed in his deliberations, Tarts followed. They floated higher, towards the main hangar. When they left the shaft, Demeira on Thanos was waiting for him. She looked into his eyes, her head raised proudly. Apparently, she had not let herself be beaten, which impressed him.

"Thank you for coming," said Tarts. "It's about the three prisoners."

"How shall I deal with them?"

"They will remain in detention, under increased security. They must not be harmed, but they will leave Atlantis as soon as possible with the convoy. When will you be ready to return to Arkon?"

"In a day." The commander signaled to the soldier to retreat. The man stepped into the shaft and floated upwards. As soon as he was out of sight, she added: "Actually..."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"There is another reason I'm meeting you here, Tarts de Telomar. I haven't been able to address it yet. We may not be able to leave on time. I did not only come to Atlantis to bring the supplies."

"Oh?"

She held out a data crystal to him. Tarts took it and stared at it in amazement.

"It bears the Emperor's personal signature."

"You'll find that it's real," the commander said in a tone that made it clear to him that he might as well save himself the check. "I'm supposed to bring something back to Arkon on direct orders from the Emperor. Or more precisely...someone. It seems to me that

there is no better partner in this respect than you, Tarts, because I am facing a problem."

His hand closed around the data crystal. "You mean..."

"Right. The one is not available. The Emperor has ordered his son back to court. On his behalf, I am to ensure Atlan da Gonozal's safe journey home."

Back in his quarters on the *Tosoma*, Tarts lay down on his bed in full uniform. He was exhausted, but above all, he had to think. About a lot of things.

About his foster son, Atlan, who had set out for an unknown destination because he hoped to end the war against the Methanes...and who was now being called back to Arkon by his real father.

About his own death, which was now opposed by the equally miraculous and bizarre idea of eternal life, which robbed him of all inner peace.

And about the evacuation and the imminent destruction of the colony of Atlantis.

Each and every one of these issues weighed heavily on him, a greater burden than any Arkonide had to bear in his whole life. With his hands clasped behind his neck, he stared at the ceiling and followed the intricate lines in the imitation wood he had installed there. It reminded him of the room in his parents' house where he had spent his childhood. It helped him think, and the labyrinthine patterns had carried him to sleep often enough.

Do you know it?

Was Atlan's disappearance related to the castaways? They had claimed that he was one of the two survivors of the colony's demise, surviving into its supposedly distant future. How could it be that these three...time travelers, though he was reluctant to even think the word...had arrived in the ship that was supposed to pick Atlan up?

The path to the Planet of Eternal Life?

Slowly and almost imperceptibly, his thoughts mingled with bizarre dream images; only his extra sense pointed it out. But the day had been long, and his old body demanded its right, whether he liked it or not.

His eyelids fell shut, and with difficulty, he opened them again and drifted away in the pattern of the wooden labyrinth. Suddenly

a Methane scout broke through the clouds over Atlantis along with the half-destroyed ship with the open hull that had survived the infernal destruction of the mountain world, and from the skeleton of the scout rained a half-shredded Methane, kept alive by strange instruments and surrounded by green atmospheric fumes. One of the dead soldiers looked at him and his eyes were broken. The pale mouth opened and spoke with the voice of the human woman*: "Do you know it?"*

Tarts jerked awake.

The images disappeared.

Of course, he had missed something! How could he have forgotten? The prisoners had spoken of two survivors: Atlan and Cunor. This could only have meant Cunor ter Pelgan, the daredevil, his weapons officer, whose place was on board the flagship *Tosoma*. How could it be possible that he of all people survived the fall of Atlantis? What nonsense that one day Cunor was stranded with Atlan on Earth or in Kosol's dome!

Tarts rushed into his hygiene cell, stared into the mirror, held his hands under the water, and rubbed his eyes. After that, he looked a little better.

He called up the headquarters roster. Cunor would not be there, likely asleep in his quarters. He gave the order to the onboard positronics to wake him up and order him to headquarters. He had to talk to him, prove that the story of the prisoners could not be true.

Tarts was about to leave his quarters when he came up with an idea that he immediately put into action. He gave the positronic yet another mission, this time being in direct contact with the prisoners. He was curious to see whether this provision would bring new insights.

When he finally reached headquarters, his weapons officer was already there.

"Cunor," said Tarts. *You certainly won't be stranded with Atlan on Larsaf III.* As a military officer with a strong sense of duty and ambition, he would never leave his place on the flagship, and certainly not during a Methane attack. Nevertheless, there was an easy way to...help fate. Just to be on the safe side. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

"Of course, Commander. Why did you call me? What..." He faltered, started again. "What can I do for you?"

“I have a new task for you, Cunor. You know about the convoy that will soon leave Larsaf III?”

“Of course,” repeated the officer. He was probably expecting a secret mission, a special mission. But Tarts had something else in mind.

“I’ll transfer you to the *Ektem*. Commander on Thanos will assign you a task there. You will return to Arkon with the convoy.”

Cunor froze, and suddenly his face was almost as pale as his hair. “But commander, I... Why are you demoting me? What mistake have I made?”

Tarts felt sorry for the young man, but there were moments in a military career that let lofty plans burst, seemingly for no reason. Not for the first time, Tarts had to destroy a career, or at least give it an unexpected twist. “There is no mistake. You have your orders, Cunor.”

“I would like to formally protest this decision!”

Tarts clenched his hands. “Listen to me carefully, Cunor, for I say these words only for your sake. Be careful that your protests do not reach the wrong ears, or you will not find yourself on another battleship but in the garbage recycling center of the most pathetic supply barge of the convoy! Do we understand each other?”

He expected further opposition, but this time Cunor ter Pelgan proved to be wise. “Yes, Commander.”

“Prepare everything. I hereby release you from duty for your next shift. Use this to prepare your move.”

Cunor confirmed with an expressionless face and left the headquarters. Tarts looked after him and felt infinite relief. Cunor would not be stranded on Atlantis. The words of the prisoners were nonsense...otherwise, it would not have been possible to send him away. Because if it was indeed predestined, it had already happened in the future, and Tarts could not have changed it with such a simple provision.

His head was buzzing. Such mind games were not his world. The old Arkonide felt indescribable relief. That babble about immortality, about the Planet of Eternal Life, had been proven wrong. He had shaken off the spirits that beset him.

Everything was good.

He was able to return to real problems now. Atlan was gone. Atlantis had to be evacuated. All this demanded his utmost concentration.

These were difficulties he knew and could deal with. No nonsensical hopes of defeating death. No hidden longings that unexpectedly pushed to the surface with all their might! Tarts de Telomar felt free.

Until the alarm began blaring throughout the ship.

Feltif de Khemrol

It was still dark. Not a ray of sunshine fell into the house, but Feltif lay awake in his bed. He didn't have to see anything; his memory was clear enough to evoke the images again. In the silence, he heard D'ihra's deep breaths.

Carefully, he pushed the blanket back, got up, and walked naked onto the terrace at the top of the funnel of his house. Stars glittered in the sky. Feltif knew exactly in which direction Arkon lay, and he knew the visible sun that came closest to home. Underneath was a black area. The forest, recognizable only as a shadow, blocked the view. The cackling of an animal, probably a monkey, echoed in the darkness.

The starlight shone brighter than usual. When he closed his eyes, he saw no more pictures of the war as he had seen months ago, nor scenes from the everyday difficulties of running this colony. Instead, he felt a freedom he had never known before. The problems and duties of a Tato were suddenly smaller, even incidental. The cruel war seemed infinitely distant.

He walked along until he could look past the tower to the spaceport. Before that, scattered lights glittered on the lake, barely visible thanks to the brightness of the landing field. There, freighters had gone down and unloaded their cargo. Apparently, the long overdue supplies had finally arrived. Why was the convoy so late?

Feltif took a few more steps to the interface of the house positronics, identified himself with his personal access code, and projected a holographic display.

He then retrieved the current traffic data of the spaceport. Thanks to his security level, he had access to all information. The reason for the delay was also easy to find out: the convoy under the command of Demeira on Thanos had rescued three castaways.

Very unusual. It was contrary to the general rules of the fleet.

And that, in turn, pleased Feltif, he could not deny it. It testified either to a major mistake and thus to stupidity or to the ability of the commander to think independently. Feltif ruled out stupidity in an Arkonide in this position from the outset. It was likely that everyone but him would judge this incident as exactly the opposite, but he was not bothered by it.

He was working his way deeper into the information network to learn more when the symbol of a stylized eagle popped up on the holo display.

A visit? At this time of day? The sun still hadn't risen.

"Who wants to speak to me?" he asked.

"Kosol ter Niidar," replied the soulless voice of the house positronic.

His deputy? Feltif couldn't remember the last time Kosol had visited him at home. "Tell him that I will receive him downstairs." He touched a control panel, which dissolved the projection of the display. However, the connection to the positronic was still active. "If D'ihra wakes up while Kosol is still in the house," he added, "tell her not to leave the upper floor. If she expresses a wish, make sure it is granted. And record the conversation with my visitor."

He went back to the bedroom, slipped into clothes, and floated through the anti-grav shaft directly to the entrance of the house, covering the fourteen meters in less than three seconds.

Feltif stepped out of the shaft. "Open."

The door swung to the side. As expected, Kosol was standing in front of it, dressed in a wide black coat, a dark hat pulled low over his face. *Just as effective as a distortion field if you don't want to be recognized*, Feltif thought, *only more inconspicuous because no one who should happen to meet him would wonder about it.*

"Come in."

"Thank you."

Pointless banter.

"What brings you here?"

"You have made a mistake, Tato."

He knows. How could I have believed that D'ihra was being smuggled into the city undetected? "And you get to the point quickly."

"Anything else would be pointless, don't you think?"

Feltif led his visitor to a small table around which four armchairs were grouped. "Take a seat."

"I prefer to stand."

“Please.” Feltif sat down. “Talk to me openly.” Because that’s what Kosol would do anyway.

“You’re neglecting your duties!”

“Because I left Atlantis? I beg you, Kosol, think about it! Atlan personally allowed me to do so. I did not flee in the dark. I’m conducting research. And all this for the benefit of my colony. And all the work I have to do is delegated for the duration of my absence.”

“Hardly anyone knows that better than me,” replied his visitor.

Feltif smiled slightly. “Much to my relief, I know that the day-to-day political business is in good hands with you.”

Kosol stood behind the chair directly opposite Feltif. His fingers clung to the top edge. “You are failing as the Tato of this colony, and to a degree that I would never have thought possible!”

“You realize that I—”

Kosol abruptly lost his temper. “I know about your human!” He shouted the words. “You’ve been seen, Feltif! Of course, the automatic robot station reported its arrival! How could you do that?”

“Why did I bring a human woman into the city? She is—”

“There is a ban on fraternization! A strict ban, Tato! And don’t tell me that whore isn’t in this house, in your bedroom!”

“What do you want, Kosol?”

“I will no longer stand idly by and watch your activities. Get this woman out of Atlantis today and I will be silent one last time. As your deputy, I have a duty to you, whether I like it or not. But if this whore—”

“D’ihra,” interrupted Feltif, who felt a strange, all-encompassing calm within himself. “Her name is D’ihra. She is considered a seer by her people, and I granted her political asylum.”

Kosol’s fingernails drilled into the leather of the chair. “I don’t care what fine words you conjure up for it. This must end! Who are you loyal to, Tato? The people of this world or Arkon? Get the woman out of the city or I’ll report your fraternization to the fleet command. Then Atlan won’t be able to protect you, however you originally got him to cover up your escapades!”

“You think I manipulated Atlan? It was his decision to support me and allow me to mingle with the inhabitants of this world. Or do you think the Emperor’s son is not capable of his own thoughts?”

Kosol withdrew his hands. The back of the chair rocked. His

fingers left slight sweat prints. “I’ll give you six hours, then I’ll report it. Prove yourself to be a clever man once again, Feltif. For the sake of our cooperation, of which I have fond memories before you embarked on this foolish trip! Don’t worry about the barbarians of this world!”

“Let me explain something to you.”

“No!”

“I am your Tato! So please, listen to me!”

But Kosol turned away. “You are no longer my Tato. Not until you’ve made amends for your mistake. You have crossed a line, Feltif, which will convince the fleet commander to demote you to the lowest rank of a simple soldier if he learns about it. One of the poor souls who is burned in battle with the Methanes. And if you want to take that as a threat, I cannot disagree with you. I owe it to Arkon. If you were to carry out your duties as Tato, you would know what conditions prevail in Atlantis. What danger the colony may pose. Instead, Tarts de Telomar and I have to take care of it. The convoy has finally arrived and brought three castaways of unknown origin here. If they are Methane spies, it could endanger all our lives. Look at it!”

His deputy clapped a mobile projection device onto the table and turned it on. The holographic image of three alien figures formed over it: an Arkonide, a humanoid that seemed to come from this planet, and a lizard creature.

Kosol turned away and left the room without looking back.

Feltif stared after him, shocked. He considered having positronics play back the recording of their conversation but decided against it. There was nothing he could have misunderstood. Instead, he gave the order to delete the recording.

Remove D’ihra from Atlantis? He couldn’t. The woman fascinated him, and more than that, he loved her. Still, he had to. He had no other choice. Kosol had not exaggerated in the slightest. If it became known what he had done, he would lose his post faster than he could defend himself and would find himself on one of the countless fronts in hand-to-hand combat.

Footsteps rang out behind him, and a moment later D’ihra was sitting naked in the chair next to him.

“You’re angry,” she said. “What happened?”

He searched for the right words that would explain everything to her, but he couldn’t find them. “How did you get here? I have—”

“You ordered that voice to stop me from coming down, I know.” She said it matter-of-factly, without anger or blame. “But you also gave the order that every wish should be granted to me. So I wished I could go down, which plunged the voice into an inner contradiction. She explained everything I needed.”

He was stunned. D’ihra did not understand how such an electronic house system worked, knew nothing about technology or the laws they followed, but she had tricked a sophisticated Arkonide positronic system in a matter of moments.

Now she was pointing at the holographic rendering of the three strangers. “They’re to blame, aren’t they?”

“No, I... I don’t think so. They’re castaways. Our units rescued them from the infinite sea between the stars that I told you about. They can’t do anything to anyone.”

D’ihra leaned forward, and the light shone on the skin of her torso and breasts. She tried to grasp the image of the woman, but her fingers slid through. Startled, she froze for a moment, then closed her hand around the holograph, but there was nothing she could grip. Instead, the points of light danced on her fingers, veins, and knuckles. The face stretched bizarrely over her thumb.

“You can’t touch these images,” he explained unnecessarily. D’ihra withdrew her hand. “They are strangers, of no importance to us.”

She stood up and sat down on the back of his chair. Her bare thighs touched him. “You’re wrong!” He felt her breath, smelled her scent. “This woman! Beware of her!”

“Why? You—”

“Get rid of this picture! Make it go away!”

Feltif turned off holographic playback. D’ihra immediately relaxed. She slid even closer to him until she was sitting on top of him.

His thoughts were racing. Kosol and his demand. His duties as Tato of the colony. D’ihra’s strange behavior at the sight of the strangers.

“No, no,” he said when she moved to kiss him.

“Why not?”

A simple question to which he did not know the answer. *Because the deadline that Kosol has granted me is already running out and there is not much time left?* Nonsense! “Why not,” he repeated, albeit as a statement. He lifted D’ihra up and laid her on the

ground.

Why not?

He had fallen asleep again, on the floor. Her hand was on his chest. When he woke up, he thought, and in those moments of calm he realized that he really had no choice.

Even if he chose D'ihra, he wouldn't win her. He was probably only causing her death, let alone his own. The Empire's war machine knew no mercy for soldiers and officers of any rank who opposed it. They would both die.

However, if he followed the...the *ultimate advice* of his deputy, he would save not only himself and his post as Tato, but above all D'ihra's life. If he took her to a safe place, possibly gave her a weapon or two, she would not die.

These conclusions were simple and perfectly clear. And they came from the considerations of a coward.

But in this situation, only a coward could survive. The honorable went down with waving flags.

He took her hand. "D'ihra," he said.

She did not wake up.

"D'ihra!"

Fluttering, her eyelids opened.

The alarm went off before he could say a word.

Crest da Zoltral

Crest, Michalovna, and Trker-Hon sat in their quarters aboard the *Ektem*, which now seemed more and more like what it actually was: a cell.

"Did Tarts de Telomar believe us?" asked Trker-Hon.

"It doesn't seem like it," said the telepath grumpily. "According to his last statement, he thinks we're crazy. Not the best starting position for further negotiations."

"Were you able to read his mind?"

"Not in the end." Michalovna raised her hand. "I know. It would have been necessary. That much was clear to me too. But I was too exhausted. No one is more annoyed by this than me."

"No one blames you," Crest assured her. "We know you did what you could."

“Yes,” she replied. “But I blame myself. It would have been extremely important to know what he really thinks. Maybe we could have approached him emotionally and gotten him on our side.”

Crest put his hand on her shoulder reassuringly. “We’ve tried that several times. You, with your reference to...” He tried to remember.

“Ronjano IV,” she finished. “An extremely private memory for him. He never told anyone what happened there. You’ll understand that I won’t say anything else about it. It doesn’t matter. I caught his attention; that’s enough.”

“Of course,” said the Arkonide. “Later, I tried to lure him with the possibility of eternal life. For a man his age and with his life experience, it must be an important issue. Nevertheless, we did not succeed in winning him over. We couldn’t have done more.”

“That’s not certain,” interjected the Topsidan. “Perhaps our words will work on him. He has dedicated his life to defending Atlantis. What we have said cannot have left him unscathed. If he thinks it is even possible that we have more information about a Methane attack, he will contact us again.”

Michalovna rested her chin on her fists. “We will no longer be able to influence his behavior. What should we do?” There were dark circles under her eyes. They seemed tired.

“You’re exhausted, Tatiana,” said Crest.

“More than that. I could fall asleep on the spot.”

“Then do that. Perhaps you will soon need all your strength.”

“But shouldn’t we try to escape before this ship leaves Atlantis? Don’t we have to flee? Or should we simply hope that this ominous Atlan appears before our departure? Even if he does, what then? Will he talk to us or is our fate already sealed with Tarts’s decision?”

“I’ll add another question,” said Trker-Hon. “Is Atlan really immortal? Tarts de Telomar doesn’t seem to know about it. His reaction to what we said was clear. And shouldn’t one of the closest companions of this Emperor’s son know of his immortality?”

Tatiana got up and started one of her restless wanderings around the room again. “That’s definitely too many questions for me! It’s time for some answers. And they won’t come to us if we sit around here idly.” She grinned at Crest. “Or wait, if you prefer.”

“The fact that Atlantis will soon perish speaks for an escape,”

said Crest. “As far as we know, there are no survivors apart from Atlan da Gonozal and Cunor ter Pelgan. If we stay here, we die. Or not? Maybe some ships escape. But even if the *Ektem* manages to flee, we will be taken to Arkon, where it will turn out that our story was just a lie. Pure fiction. We will be put on trial. Which means that a court-martial will condemn us as traitors. We will be executed.”

“You’re bursting with optimism,” Michalovna said.

“I’m merely listing the possibilities that remain to us and the consequences that would result from them. So escaping from the *Ektem* and Atlantis is our only viable option. Hiding somewhere on this planet. On a primitive world where we are stuck until one day we will die.” The Arkonide closed his eyes. “Which in my case won’t take much longer.”

“But Crest, you—”

“Hush, Tatiana! I’m just facing the facts.”

The Topsidan gave a kind of bark that Crest remembered was an expression of surprise. “I came up with something! You’re talking about the facts, Crest, and they say there’s another possibility.”

“Go on!” demanded Tatiana.

“There is a way to leave Earth that we haven’t thought of before.”

“And that would be?”

“The underwater dome! This is where our odyssey began in the future. Perhaps it ends there, or at least leads us to a new starting point. Kerlon stationed the transmitter there before the sinking of Atlantis, so it will already exist. Right under our noses, so to speak; not far away.”

The telepath laughed. “You’re right! The only catch is that we’re trapped here and there are probably a few hundred or a thousand Arkonides on the *Ektem* and in Atlantis who stand in our way and will happily put a bullet in us.”

“Not happily,” Crest objected, “and probably not a physical bullet either…but in principle, you’re right. Still, it’s the best idea yet. What we need is a plan to break out.”

Crest immediately came up with a dozen things that would be helpful: at least ten hours of sleep for everyone; some weapons and protective shields, or even better, combat suits; several soldiers on their side; no sick, old Arkonides who were only a burden to the

group.

But wishful thinking wouldn't help them. According to his analysis, an escape attempt was doomed to failure. "I suggest that we wait for Atlan da Gonozal and try to get his attention. If he does indeed possess immortality or is pursuing it, he will also learn that we have mentioned the Planet of Eternal Life. He will come to see us."

"I have to disagree," said Trker-Hon. "Maybe it's because I'm not an Arkonide and that, as a stranger, I'm eyed by everyone even more suspiciously than the two of you. We should start an escape attempt. If it fails, at least we will have tried instead of waiting idly for our end, whether because of the Methane attacks or because we are dragged before some impromptu justice system that sentences us."

Crest rubbed a tear of excitement from the corner of his eye with his index finger. "If we want to be democratic, you won't like the conclusion, Tatiana: your voice is decisive."

The telepath gasped. "You're not serious! I can't decide! And anyway...why should we be democratic? You can hardly say, Crest, that your people live democratically. And with you, Trker-Hon, it doesn't look like that either."

"This social form is not the measure of all things," the Arkonide admitted.

The Topsidan lifted himself up with his tail. "And it is not decisive for our situation. If you don't help me, I'll flee alone. Should I die in the process, I accept my fate. Maybe my life should have ended in the Vega system. Since then, I've only been running away from the inevitable."

"Inevitable?" cried Crest, more aggressively than he had intended. The situation was eating away at his nerves, and he felt the pain pounding softly in a dozen parts of his body, still hidden behind a merciful curtain, but thinner and thinner. "Is that all you have to say? We have set out to find eternal life! Death is no longer inevitable! Not for us!"

"Quiet, please!" cried Michalovna.

Trker-Hon shouted at her, "If you believe that, you are a fool! Take a look around! See where our search has taken us! We—are—at the—end!"

Our nerves are raw, Crest thought, amazed by how quickly the situation had suddenly changed, although they were...friends.

Companions.

The door opened. Their heads jerked around.

Crest had hoped to see Tarts or Commander on Thanos. Instead, a female Arkonide staggered into the room, looking around like a cornered animal. She held her arms crossed in front of her chest, as if she wanted to hug herself.

No...not an Arkonide. A hybrid. Crest couldn't believe his eyes.

"Quiniu Soptor?" he exclaimed, bewildered. "What are you doing here?"

The half-Arkonide had belonged to the crew of the *Aetron* in Crest's present and, along with Thora, Tamika, and himself, was one of the few survivors of the destruction of the wrecked ship on Earth's moon.

She staggered to the middle of the room, passing Trker-Hon and Michalovna without sparing them a look. Crest looked at her briefly, but she didn't seem to recognize him. Her eyes, set in her dark face, moved restlessly. The rust-red feather fluff she bore in place of hair looked neglected.

"Quiniu," repeated the Arkonide, "what happened to you? How did you end up here?"

She continued to falter, not responding to her name. Each of her movements reminded him of a frightened, confused animal, trapped. Crest remembered her so differently. What might have happened to her to make her behave this way? Or was this woman not Quiniu Soptor at all? Was it just an extreme similarity?

That would be far less likely than the appearance of the real Quiniu Soptor, commented his extra sense. *Why would the leaders of the* Ektem *send this person into the room if they did not believe she is related to us?*

Crest recalled what he knew about Quiniu. The half-Arkonide had accompanied his foster daughter Thora on a reconnaissance flight through the Earth's solar system. Over Venus, the spacecraft with Thora and Tamika on board had been shot down. For a long time, Crest had believed that the second reconnaissance craft piloted by Soptor had also been destroyed in the attack. But he was wrong: she had managed to swerve off in time and get to Earth. Instead of joining him and Thora there, however, she had tracked down the mysterious robot, Rico. Alongside the android, she had advanced into the submarine dome off the Azores and gone through

the transmitter, taking a path that Crest and his companions had followed a few weeks later. And now their paths had crossed. It was an incredible coincidence. And logical.

The question Crest asked was also logical. “Where is the robot? Quiniu, what happened to Rico?”

This question seemed to get through to her, perhaps because the name of the robot awoke memories in her or perhaps due to the apparently traumatic event that had left her so distraught. She turned around, and a veil seemed to disappear before her eyes as she blinked several times.

“Rrrrricooooo,” she said slowly. “He... He’s...”

She didn’t get any further.

The door flew open again and an alarm sounded through the ship.

10.

The Second Reconnaissance Craft
Tarts de Telomar

The time had come.

And he, Tarts de Telomar, had failed.

He had let himself be distracted by unnecessary questions. Even without Atlan's presence, he would have had to act immediately upon his arrival. Because of his hesitation, thousands might now die.

The only chance to prevent it, or at least postpone it, was to strike quickly.

The automatic alarm of the observation probe in a solar system only ten light-years away had sent an ice-cold chill through him. Tarts had reacted immediately, forwarding the danger to all major stations and ordering the evacuation of the entire colony, albeit without ships being allowed to take off. All of Atlantis had to pretend to be dead to avoid detection by the enemies, if it wasn't already too late.

Maybe it was just an unfortunate coincidence. It may not have meant the end of this colony and the death of all its inhabitants. All they had to do was be ready to flee as quickly as possible in an emergency. Every minute could save dozens of lives.

Tarts, on the other hand, was lurking on the *Tosoma* and observing the source of the alarm via the shielded hypercom signals. The probe had discovered a Methane reconnaissance craft in the system of a red dwarf. Perhaps it was a partner ship looking for the unit destroyed by the *Tosoma*...or a coincidence. Perhaps this ship was just the spy looking for the exact location of the colony suspected somewhere in this cosmic region, the harbinger of a whole wave of warships.

Although Tarts had to consider all possibilities, he felt—no, knew—that the last one was true. Since his return to Atlantis, he had felt that catastrophe was imminent, and now it had begun.

Star gods, stand by us!

Should he also pretend to be dead, ready in case the reconnaissance craft advanced into the Larsaf system or an entire enemy fleet materialized? Or had the time for an attack to destroy these Methanes before they could report anything long since passed?

The old Arkonide knew from experience that standing still was often preferable to the blind use of firepower. The pilot was ready to start immediately after calculating and inputting the course into the system. But it hadn't come to that yet.

Still...still! Again and again, de Telomar's thoughts returned to this point. He tried to justify his passiveness. The responsibility for the safety of all residents in Atlantis weighed heavily on him.

His thoughts went around in circles even though he knew he was just lying to himself.

When he closed his eyes, he could see the bombardment descending on Atlantis. It would be the city's fate, this proud colony of people far from their home planet, just as it had been for the dead planet on which the *Tosoma* had destroyed the first Methane reconnaissance craft. A chaos of bombs and destruction awaited to seal the fate of many. There, it had been mountains that broke apart; here, in a tsunami, the floods of the sea would rise as a result of the tremors and the earthquakes, burying everything beneath them.

In a single day and a single night, Atlantis would perish, the human woman named Tatiana Michalovna had claimed. Suddenly, those words no longer seemed foolish to him. In that respect, too, he had only been deceiving himself. What could it change to order Cunor ter Pelgan to a foreign ship and send him away from Larsaf III? Fate, destiny, or the hand of the star gods—whatever it was, it was not so easy to trick.

Suddenly, his body went cold as he realized that ter Pelgan was still there...and would still be if the Methanes went on the attack. But that proved nothing! The strangers were lying! There was no such thing as time travel or immortality!

Do you know it?

The path to the Planet of Eternal Life?

The stream of messages from the probe ten light-years away stopped abruptly. Their view into the nearby solar system was blocked.

Tarts needed no further proof. The reconnaissance craft had discovered and destroyed the barely five-meter-large probe. From this moment at the latest, the ship would go on a search to find out why it had been placed there.

The Methanes would discover Atlantis.

"Start the evacuation!" he ordered. "Highest priority."

At the same time, he gave the pilot the signal to go. The *Tosoma* took off at top speed.

Ten light-years. An almost tiny transition leap. The battleship materialized, and the simple, fast-as-light auxiliary craft were sent out. All that remained for them was to attack and hope the Methane craft could be swiftly destroyed, fast enough that it would be unable to send a message to the Methane fleet...which had probably already happened mere moments after they had discovered the probe.

But hope, it was said, died last...a myth that Tarts had not believed for a long time.

The situation was fundamentally different from their last hunt for a scout ship. This time, the Methanes were expecting an attack. They were already flying an escape course.

The fighters and the *Tosoma* attacked together, firing at the speeding ship. The enemy pilot flew hair-raising evasive maneuvers while using the same tactics as his counterpart, who had been crushed on the nameless celestial body under the collapsing mountains. The scout was racing towards a planet of the red dwarf, a world in the life zone.

He continued to accelerate; he wanted to jump into hyperspace. In a breakneck maneuver, he passed a moon a few kilometers away and at the same time corrected his course, close to the surface of the satellite planet with no atmosphere. From a distance, the sight was reminiscent of an insect scurrying over a bare moon rock.

The *Tosoma* fighters fired. Salvos of energy hit the lunar surface. In the vacuum of silent explosions, masses of dust and rock were thrown up for miles. One of the Arkonide craft flew into a field of debris that suddenly appeared in front of it. The pilot apparently lost his orientation and made a fatal mistake. The ship exploded on the lunar surface. Flames welled up and were suffocated immediately; it only lasted a moment.

There was no time to think about the catastrophe right now. Tarts now took over the control of the *Tosoma* himself and tried to

bring the ship onto the course of the enemy craft. If they succeeded, they would be able to catch up to the Methane ship.

The *Tosoma* jumped faster than light over a distance of a few light seconds. Tarts changed, orienting himself to the new position. His bold and desperate plan had succeeded.

The reconnaissance craft was now racing towards the *Tosoma*, followed by the Arkonide fighters. The planet lay behind the ship, a blue-green disc over the top of which the light of the red dwarf burst out like a luminous aura.

A new day, thought Tarts. *But not for you.* He fired. The salvo smashed into the protective shield of the small Methane craft. The ship turned into a flashing light as the shield absorbed the energy, partly dissipating it. The *Tosoma* fighters were also able to attack, shoot, and hit accurately.

For a moment, Tarts felt infinite relief. Only a few more moments and the force field would overload. The craft didn't stand a chance.

Everything that came afterwards could be seen. Perhaps doom had been averted once again. It was possible the Methanes hadn't immediately relayed a message to their military after the discovery of the probe.

The Methane ship disappeared—not because the force field collapsed and the ship was shredded, but because it jumped into hyperspace at the last moment before its destruction.

There was an abrupt silence on the *Tosoma* bridge. It was clear to every crew member what this meant. Even de Telomar, who denounced himself as an old fool guided by hope, could no longer entertain any illusions. The Methanes would soon return, and in greater numbers. A large military squadron was certainly waiting to crush the Arkonide resistance.

The downfall of Atlantis was sealed.

Tarts established a radio link to the colony. "Advance the evacuation!" His voice threatened to fail. "Quickly!"

He steered the *Tosoma* back to Larsaf III and ordered the fighters to hold their position. He would return and collect them as soon as he could. Having them board first would take too much time. He had to defend the colony until his last breath, allowing as many Arkonides as possible to escape.

He was overwhelmed by a sense of cold as he thought of all the

ships in the convoy that were doomed if they did not flee fast enough. Thousands of civilians were on board.

The *Tosoma* materialized over Larsaf III. And only shortly thereafter, cylindrical warships fell out of hyperspace. Five. Ten. Twenty.

This is the end, Tarts thought as he ordered the attack.

11.

Evacuation
Crest da Zoltral

Soldiers stormed into the room. “Come with us!” one of them shouted.

In the background, the alarm was still howling, an annoying sound that was only slowly reduced to a lower volume. Crest knew what it meant—the sound was different from the one used on Arkonide warships ten thousand years later, but the symbolism behind it was unmistakable. They were under attack.

“What—” Trker-Hon began.

The soldiers did not let him speak. “The Methanes are attacking! The colony will be evacuated. You will be kept on a higher security level.”

“You’re locking us up in a cell while—”

“Pure precaution,” the soldier interrupted again. “And now follow me or we’ll have to use force!”

“Your words don’t sound as reassuring as they should,” Michalovna said.

“Don’t worry! Our troops will repel the attack.”

Da Zoltral exchanged a telling look with his companions. *Certainly not.* This, then, was the beginning of the downfall of Atlantis.

Soptor also seemed to understand. “Need to go,” she whispered, so quietly that Crest barely heard her. Her voice sounded rough, and her gaze still flitted unsteadily around the room. What might lie behind those eyes? And what on earth had happened to Rico, the robot that came from unimaginably high-quality technology?

“Get ouuuuuuttttt!” moaned Soptor.

But there was no way to escape. How could an old, terminally ill Arkonide, a completely exhausted human woman, a confused half-Arkonide, and a Topsidan, who was not considered a soldier but the wise man of his people, prevail against six armed space

soldiers?

"Go!" With an unmistakable gesture, the soldier drew his beamer and pointed through the open door into the corridor. Three others were waiting there, also with firearms in their hands.

A little later, the small group of prisoners marched down a narrow corridor, guarded by soldiers who were vastly superior to them in battle. At a junction, a screen integrated into the wall lit up. It showed a picture of Atlantis from a great height, probably the reproduction of the current external observation.

Atlan's tower loomed above everything in its simple, sublime construction. The light refracted in the glass pyramid at the top. Something small whizzed close by, leaving a smoking trail behind it, a black line across the sky. The bomb hit the lake and detonated. Tidal waves swept up. Huge amounts of water evaporated in a flash. Earth and rock followed in glowing fountains, mixed with burning plants that twirled eerily slowly in the air.

The soldiers leading the small squad through the corridor faltered, staring at the images. Da Zoltral immediately realized that their chance had come. They just couldn't make the same mistake as their guards. *Don't get distracted by what you see, no matter how horrible it is. This is just the beginning.*

The playback on the screen shifted as the camera recording the scene changed angles. The sea at the gates of Atlantis appeared, as well as the sky above.

A sky full of spaceships.

Arkonide battleships and small auxiliary units positioned themselves in a defensive ring, trying to build a protective wall over the colony. But they were opposed by enemy units—an unmanageable amount, far more than those who wanted to stand in the way of the attackers.

"Eighty Methane ships," said one of the soldiers dully. His voice sounded like that of a desperate child. "And there are more to come!"

Da Zoltral felt a touch on his arm. Tatiana. *Be ready,* he thought intently. *We will flee!*

The first firefight broke out over Atlantis. One of the Methane ships broke through the defensive ring and raced towards the city. It fired and individual houses perished in destructive explosions. In the next moment, the enemy unit broke into two parts, which fell burning into the depths. It crashed into the sea, very close to

another sinking wreck; its crew must have dropped the first bomb that detonated in the lake.

Out of the corner of his eye, da Zoltral saw Soptor suddenly standing behind one of the stunned soldiers, pulling a beamer from the soldier's belt with a skillful movement. The distracted man did not even notice, staring spellbound at the horrific spectacle that heralded the demise of his world.

Soptor scurried into the side corridor, and at the same moment, Trker-Hon turned into a fighting machine. He rammed his fist into one soldier's face and knocked out the legs of another with his tail. As if by magic, he snatched the weapon from the hand of a third and fired. Another Arkonide fell to the ground.

Michalovna went on the attack at the same time, and before the completely dismayed soldiers understood what was happening to them, Soptor was also back and firing quickly and purposefully, twice, three times.

Relieved, Crest noticed that the weapons were set to stun mode. There would be enough deaths in the next few hours.

Suddenly, one of the remaining soldiers grabbed him from behind, wrapped an arm around his neck and pressed the mouth of his weapon to his temple. "Stop immediately! You..."

"Don't do anything stupid," said Crest, wondering how he managed to stay so calm. "Don't you see what's happening? We don't pose a danger! The real enemies are lurking out there, and they'll break through any moment. Let us go! Help evacuate and save the lives of as many Arkonides as possible!"

"We didn't kill anyone," Trker-Hon added, "because we respect life. No Topsidan destroys it without an inescapable reason! Help your comrades and make sure they don't die!"

The grip around Crest's neck loosened; the weapon was put away. The soldier pushed him, causing him to stagger forward. "Go, old Arkonide, and survive as we do!"

Crest hinted at a reverent bow. "I wish you the same thing."

Then they ran. They had to leave the *Ektem* and capture an auxiliary craft. Their destination was in Atlantis. Or at its gates...in the dome where the transmitter was waiting for them.

Feltif de Khemrol

They fled.

Behind them, Feltif's house burned. A third of the upper edge of the funnel was already missing. Smoke rose from the rubble. Behind it, the large bathroom yawned, the water in the floor pool evaporating under glowing sparks raining into it.

At some point, they stopped breathing heavily. Gliders raced above them. The sky shone with energy flashes and flickering force fields. The damage to Atlantis was still limited. The Methanes had so far only broken through the defensive ring of the Arkonide ships sporadically, and only the smallest, most maneuverable craft succeeded. The unthinkable was when a single warship fired a full salvo at close range, but that would probably happen soon.

Feltif, the Tato, knew that he was witnessing just the beginning of his city's agony. He looked around in a hurry. "D'ihra," he said.

She tightened the top she had hastily grabbed as they'd escaped the collapsing house. "I know," she said quietly. "This is the war you spoke of."

He saw before him the blades of the enemies of D'ihra's tribe, of the real barbarians in this world. He saw the wound on her companion's neck, the shoulder cut to the bone. A terrible injury, a brutal war, but nothing compared to what Arkonides and Methanes did when it came to battle. How much more advanced were they just because they traveled among the stars?

He mentally shook his head to rid himself of the images. He had to focus on the present if he wanted to survive and make sure that D'ihra survived with him. He planned to get her aboard one of the ships leaving Atlantis. What he himself could do afterwards, he did not know; the warships defending the colony had long been in orbit and were resisting enemy superiority.

"Follow me!" He started running again. The direct route to the spaceport led past the lake. As they approached the recreation area in the shadow of Atlan's tower, his breath stopped.

The lake no longer existed. An explosion had turned large parts of the area into a scattered debris field. The last remnants of water ran through a path of destruction into the sea. A deep trench yawned between the crane's platforms—which miraculously still stood—and the tower. Arkonides lay motionless on its steep slopes.

He grabbed D'ihra's hand, dragged her with him past smoking vegetation. The crown of a tree was burning. Sparks crackled away. As they passed the former riverside path, Feltif's feet sank into

earthy mud up to his ankles with every step. A huge wave from the lake must have swept over this area; the water was still a few centimeters high, where it could not drain.

They went on, becoming one with a stream of dozens of Arkonides moving towards the spaceport. A detonation in the distance boomed in his ears, and he thought he felt the shock wave like a blow. Something cracked in his ear canals. The reverberation was amplified by a volley of smaller explosions.

He followed the eyes of the screaming crowd all around them. A fireball hung in the sky, and from it, smoking metal parts raced into the depths. The flames collapsed, and in the center of the black cloud it glowed gloomy red. One of the pieces smashed the roof of a house on the side edge of the riverside meadow and broke through the front wall before drilling deep into the earth.

Still clutching D'ihra's arm, Feltif hurried on. In front of them lay a woman facedown in a puddle. Her left arm was missing.

Farther.

Just farther.

In the midst of a headless crowd, they reached the landing field, where soldiers were provisionally maintaining order in the chaos. The evacuation plans had taken effect, and the military was ensuring that as many inhabitants of the colony as possible could board the escape ships.

A soldier apparently recognized him and waved him through, sending him to one of the largest craft. D'ihra followed him wordlessly.

Before boarding the small ship, he found a lonely figure waiting for him.

Ter Niidar blocked his way. "You've already been spotted, Feltif. I knew you were coming."

"Then step aside and let us through so that—"

"No," his deputy interrupted. "You can get on board. But not your playmate. I won't let it take an Arkonide's place."

"That's madness! We have no time for such nonsense!"

Ter Niidar drew a beamer. "This is war, Tato! If you prove unworthy, I will remove you from office and do what must be done myself." He sounded completely calm and clear, not half beside himself with anger as during their last discussion.

"The Methanes are attacking, Kosol! Think about what you're doing. There are more important things than—"

Ter Niidar raised his gun and aimed it at him. “Feltif de Khemrol, as your deputy, I hereby remove you from the office of Tato of the colony of Atlantis. Resign. Immediately!”

Feltif was speechless for seconds. He raised his hands helplessly. “Do you really want to shoot me and do the Methanes’ dirty work?”

“No.” Kosol swung the barrel of the weapon until the muzzle pointed at D’ihra’s head. “You pose no danger, Feltif.”

From where he stood, Feltif jumped forward and struck with a Dagor attack. He heard something break: Kosol’s forearm. The beamer dropped from the deputy’s powerless hands and hit the floor of the spaceport, where Feltif kicked the weapon away.

The other man screamed in pain, pulled the injured arm to his body, and rammed his knee into his opponent’s abdomen at the same time. Groaning, Feltif curled up. He saw Kosol’s distorted face in front of him and raised his hands, presenting himself defenseless.

“We both made mistakes. This is no longer about us or any orders or guidelines. The only thing that matters is that as many people as possible survive.”

Kosol’s broken arm trembled. He touched it where it was broken. Tears ran from his eyes. “You’re right. Get on board. Both of you. Our time is up. Now the military must save what it can save.”

Feltif sought his deputy’s gaze. “I hope you survive and that we will see each other again one day.”

He turned to D’ihra and saw her backing away.

“For nothing in the world would I enter this starship.” Without turning around again, she ran off towards the edge of the spaceport.

Demeira on Thanos

It was difficult for her not to intervene in the defensive battle. Everything in her was pushing to throw the *Ektem* into battle, to strengthen the defensive ring under the command of Tarts de Telomar on the *Tosoma*, but her task was different. She was protecting the ships of her convoy, which took in refugees until their loading capacities were far exceeded. Commander after commander closed their air locks, denying desperate Arkonides entry.

On Thanos tracked the situation from the bridge over a dozen

holos and even more radio contacts. She observed the launch preparations and kept an eye on the overall strategic holo, which showed the situation in the area around Larsaf III.

An incoming message caught her attention; the sender was Tarts de Telomar himself. It was on a shielded frequency.

"You did the right thing, Commander," said de Telomar.

"Please?"

"When you rescued the three refugees. It was right. If it's in your power, make sure the three castaways survive. Do you understand, Demeira? I have to leave the colony behind and allow the Methanes to destroy it because my orders stipulate that battles with the Methanes must only be fought if one's own position is clearly in the majority. If there is doubt that our people win, Demeira, I'm supposed to leave and abandon your convoy and Atlantis to their fate. But I won't. You showed me what the right thing to do is and I despised you for it. Forgive me!"

Her hands were shaking. "Tarts, I—"

"Go your own way, Demeira. Flee with your convoy and don't look back. I'll take care of the Methanes and Atlantis. I'll make sure the enemy does not follow you."

"You are an honorable man, Tarts."

"An old fool," he corrected. "One who learned an important lesson at the end of his life. Bring the convoy to safety, Commander on Thanos, and do everything for the three refugees. Each of their lives weigh as much as thousands of others; the scales cannot be compared. May the star gods accompany you! I hope that one day you will be able to fulfill your second mission and find Atlan. Give him my best."

The signal ended.

On the holo, she saw that the *Tosoma* was under fire and firing in return. They were no longer watching each other out there in space. The battle had long since begun, and she, Demeira, would not live to see its end. According to her most recent information, the convoy still had ten minutes until it could get underway.

Demeira radioed the officer she had ordered to place the three castaways under heavier guard.

12.

A Single Day and a Single Night
Tarts de Telomar

Everything had been said.

The battle raged, and de Telomar directed not only the *Tosoma*, but the entire defensive line. Ninety Methane ships stood against them, eight of which had already been destroyed. The attackers had twice as many units as the defenders. The Arkonides had no chance of winning the battle.

But de Telomar did not give up, because war consisted not of theory and mere strategy, but also perception. De Telomar would not allow the enemy to break through, not while the convoy was still on Larsaf III. That's why he was playing for time, keeping the Methanes at a distance, beating them back again and again.

All auxiliary craft had left the *Tosoma's* hangars and had joined the battle as attack fighters. One of these fighters was commanded by Cunor ter Pelgan. De Telomar had not ordered it but delegated the decision-making power for the redistribution of the team. He had read ter Pelgan's name just before his radio conversation with on Thanos, and he understood immediately. He knew what it meant, recognized the winding path of fate. It was now quite possible that Cunor ter Pelgan would survive and stay behind on the colony—after an emergency landing, for example. Exactly as the three strangers had claimed.

De Telomar had tried to prevent it, but he had failed. *Because it was already fixed in the course of time,* he realized. Just like the inevitable fact that Atlantis would perish.

But they weren't there yet.

There was hardly a living being, no matter which species or civilization they came from, who had experienced more armed conflicts than Tarts de Telomar. He was tired of war, but he also understood its nature. He knew how a space battle went, knew every conceivable attack and defense strategy. He did not miss any

mistake by his opponents, no matter how small, and while the Methanes were numerous, they relied too much on their superiority. It was a fundamental mistake that he intended to exploit.

De Telomar accidentally opened a gap in the defensive ring around Atlantis for a brief moment by maneuvering the *Tosoma*. His enemies pounced on it like fools and ran into the exact trap he had prepared. Space was boiling, the firefight was short, and in the end, they had added twelve Methane ships to the list of casualties.

However, one of the Arkonide warships, the eight hundred-meter *Daramis*, collided with a burning Methane fighter, whose pilot undoubtedly saw his end coming and turned his ship into a deadly weapon with his last breath. The upper half of the *Daramis* passed in a volley of explosions as the enemy fighter drilled through the outer spherical shell into the bowels of the battleship. The shell burst, the gigantic ship listed, and a moment later, everything disappeared in a blue blaze.

De Telomar led the operation, and as the first parts of the convoy departed, the balance of power reversed: thirty-eight Arkonide units against thirty-six Methane ships.

Crest da Zoltral

Crest wondered at their situation, probably even more than his companions.

“We’re lucky,” said Michalovna as the four of them hurried towards the entrance of a dinghy hangar.

Quiniu Soptor had gone with them without comment and remained silent since she had helped overpower the soldiers.

“Because we got this far unimpeded?” asked Crest. “That was anything but luck.”

“In any case, we didn’t plan our escape very well,” the telepath insisted. “So what else would you call it? It’s not to our credit; maybe everyone is just too busy with the Methane attack.”

“They avoided us because they didn’t want to take care of us,” Trker-Hon suggested. “Because we’re too unimportant.”

This version did not convince Crest at all. The corridor to the hangar opened in front of him. “There’s more to it than that. During a confrontation, as a prisoner, you can’t completely cross an Arkonide battleship without being captured by soldiers, robots, or

an automatic security system."

"Right!" This statement came from a woman in the uniform of a space soldier. She stood in front of a four-person glider, the identification of which was *Ektem XXXII*. "I congratulate you on your shrewdness, old man."

Soptor wordlessly pointed the captured beam weapon at the stranger, who raised her hands defensively.

"You would have been dead long ago if the commander hadn't ordered me to protect you and support you in every possible way. So lower the weapon!"

Crest nodded to Soptor and she obeyed.

"For the sake of simplicity," continued the soldier, "I have made sure that your path remains clear and that you do not meet anyone. There could have all too easily been misunderstandings. An acoustic sensor has been recording your conversations since you...fled."

"You knew what we were planning?" asked Tatiana.

"Do you seriously believe that you would otherwise still be alive?" The stranger pointed at the craft. "Follow me. I'm flying you back to Atlantis, even if I think it's foolish in this situation."

Crest could hardly believe what was happening. "Why are you helping us?"

"Didn't I already say? The commander ordered me to."

"But why did Demeira on Thanos—"

"She doesn't usually offer an explanation for her orders. So, should I take you or not?"

Trker-Hon went first. "You should."

Soon after, they were smuggled out. The *Ektem* hovered above the planet at low altitude. The first units of the convoy rose and thundered towards space. Parts of the city burned. Dozens of ships darkened the sky. The distant reflection of explosions in orbit gave everything a gloomy atmosphere.

"Just tell me one thing," the pilot pleaded. "Why by all the star gods do you want to go back to this hell?"

"The convoy would take us away from Larsaf III, into the heart of the Empire. However, what we are looking for on this world is too important to leave behind. We have found a trail, and nothing can stop us from pursuing it."

"Not even death?" she asked.

"Not even death," Crest confirmed.

Feltif de Khemrol

At some point, Feltif caught up with D'ihra as she was fleeing. She didn't look back once until he grabbed her by the shoulder and stopped her.

D'ihra whirled around, her hand ready to strike him. He blocked the attack, and she stared at him in confusion. Sweat and tears ran down her face. The fabric of her top stuck to her shoulders and breasts.

"You followed me?"

"Why don't you want to get on the spaceship?"

Her breathing was heavy. "Do you really not know, Feltif? Do you think I'm afraid?"

"You? A ridiculous idea."

"I thought about it carefully. I have taken a step into another life. To you. It has led me to a new war."

The ground shook as a bomb detonated nearby. Heat washed over them. One of the spaceport's administrative buildings was burning. Windows shattered. The blast wave caught a two-person craft nearby and tossed it aside as if it were nothing more than a loose leaf in the wind. It rolled over and crashed, scraping across the ground. Sparks flew in all directions.

D'ihra wiped sweat from her forehead. "I've tried, but I'm not going to go any farther."

"You don't have to," he replied. "Because I'll accompany you back to your world instead."

"Why?"

When she had run away, he had suddenly understood that he himself had been trying for a long time to do what she had given up in those moments: to live in two worlds. D'ihra, in her wisdom, had quickly understood that it wasn't possible. And he, Feltif, had realized in that moment what the world in which he wanted to spend his future days was. The ship would have brought him back to the Empire, to war, to a society that placed shackles on him and ultimately brought him certain death, whether during the escape or over the coming weeks and months, as his soul slowly suffocated amid Arkonide military rules and commandments.

"Why?" she asked again.

"To live," he replied, taking the lead. He wanted to go back to

his house, not to recover something from the rubble but because he knew a safe way into the woods from there. Away from Atlantis. Away from the battle and the bombardment.

Tarts de Telomar

An Arkonide craft perished in a horrific explosion, while in another scene of this desperate struggle, the *Tosoma* shelled a Methane ship four hundred meters in size until its protective shield failed and the space giant detonated. Four escape pods ejected at the last moment; a dozen shots, and they were no more.

Tarts watched from his combat control station as the *Tosoma II*, the auxiliary craft under the command of daredevil Cunor ter Pelgan, pounced on the Methanes with deadly ferocity. Ter Pelgan steered the ship into daring maneuvers, scoring more kills than anyone else and narrowly escaping destruction several times.

Is he just lucky? Tarts wondered. *Or is it because only he and Atlan will survive?*

Atlan... How he longed to have an experienced leader at his side. On the other hand, it was good that the Emperor's son was not there...since only for this reason would he survive. De Telomar no longer doubted the words of the ominous castaways. Eternal life was no illusion...or it would have been no illusion without the Methanes, without this merciless battle of annihilation. For him, there was no time left to find the path to eternal life.

Something caught his attention. The cruiser *Igita* under the command of levelheaded Commander Cerbu broke out of formation abruptly. The ship raced towards the outer planets, on a bizarre path full of twists and turns and almost impossible changes to avoid Methane shelling.

"Cerbu!" de Telomar radioed the commander. "Cerbu!"

He received no answer, while the *Igita*, after a short transition, rushed towards the sixth planet—or more precisely, towards one of the icy moons that orbited it. Suddenly, a thunderstorm of light covered the cruiser like Tarts had never seen before. Blue, yellow, green, and bright white energy patterns raced across its hull.

"Something... Something is happening!" Cerbu's voice suddenly sounded from every loudspeaker on the bridge. "Something incredible!"

“Cerbu! Explain yourself or turn back...”

“A messenger has appeared!” The *Igita* commander sounded stunned as light continued to dance across his ship. “It’s...”

Radio contact broke off when the lights from the overloaded protective shield were joined by a new storm of light: six Methane ships were firing on the *Igita*.

The cruiser didn’t have the slightest chance. For seconds, Cerbu tried to escape, but the force field collapsed and a volley of enemy shells smashed into the unprotected hull and tore it asunder. De Telomar clenched his hands into fists as he watched helplessly over the clear image of the scene as the *Igita* crashed into the icy moon; the wreck melted into the depths from the scorching heat.

The Methane ships turned away from this likely insignificant incident and returned to their focal point on the third planet.

Tarts suppressed the peculiar experience. He would take care of it later, if there was a later. More importantly, a Methane craft had broken through, badly damaged, and was now firing on Atlantis.

The *Tosoma II* raced behind it, firing on it as well and trying to push the craft away. It could not be allowed to crash over the city; there were still too many Arkonides below.

Tarts left this to ter Pelgan and proceeded to look at the overall situation. There were only a few Methane ships left. The conflict was already as good as won. The last units suddenly set a collective escape course. Cheers erupted on the *Tosoma’s* bridge, but de Telomar couldn’t share in them. This was not over; he knew that.

Do you know it, the path to the Planet of Eternal Life?

No, he didn’t know it.

And he would never be able to walk it; that was now abundantly clear when a second group of Methane ships materialized in the system. Another ninety ships—a superior force that the weakened Arkonide defense fleet could not stop.

It was over.

Definitively.

Crest da Zoltral

Crest da Zoltral, Tatiana Michalovna, Trker-Hon, and Quiniu Soptor were running through a death zone. Their pilot had not been able to drop them directly at the dome because the area was highly

fought over, and the ship suddenly found itself under fire. There had been only one choice: to get out quickly on the outskirts of the city or return to the *Ektem*.

The decision had not been difficult for the four passengers. The sound of screaming in the air seemed omnipresent. Houses collapsed under constant bombardment. The ground was torn open. Meter-high waves spilled over the banks, racing through the fields of rubble, lapping against the gigantic walls of Atlan's tower.

Already on the first holos, Crest had seen the filigree frame of the crane-like structure that supported numerous platforms. Now it was burning, and the head of the crane and one of its spread wings had been broken off. From a great height, in the middle of the blazing flames, an Arkonide jumped into the depths.

"Quiniu," Crest shouted at the half-Arkonide who had slowed down and was staring at the gruesome events as if hypnotized. The pitiful Arkonide hit the ground; he could not possibly have survived a fall from that height. "We have to go into the underwater dome, quickly!"

"Rico," came the seemingly inappropriate answer.

Was Quiniu still so confused that she couldn't think clearly and was merely on autopilot? Or did she want to tell him something important?

"What about the robot? Where can we find him? Can he help us?"

Rico was the product of incredibly advanced technology. After its own destruction, it had automatically recovered itself from a pile of scrap by regenerating itself. Did it possibly come from the same source as the transmitters? Did Quiniu know more about it by now, and was she therefore able to establish a connection?

She didn't get around to saying more. Two ships streaked out of the sky, flying at breakneck speed towards the city. They circled each other, fired incessantly. One of the shots missed, shredding the ground a few meters away from the four refugees. A beam of energy ate deep into the earth. Glowing liquid rock splashed, a rampart bulged, and Crest was thrown from his feet. The old Arkonide crashed hard, rolling away until a firm hand grabbed him and pulled him back. It was Michalovna.

He stared at the two ships, which were still falling like stones. If they hit and exploded on the ground, the detonation would pulverize half the city. The thought caused a shiver to run down his

spine.

He lifted himself up. The muscles of his upper arms trembled. The two ships—he recognized them as an Arkonide auxiliary craft and a Methane vessel—synchronously followed their flight path close to the ground, racing over the rooftops towards the sea. They continued to shoot at each other.

The murderous course brought them close to Atlan's tower. A salvo of fire struck its foundation, followed by a huge bomb from the Methane ship. Crest saw the deadly explosive device fall as if in slow motion. The bomb crashed into the tower wall, slipped into the depths, and detonated before it reached the ground.

Feltif de Khemrol

They were not far from Feltif's house when the disaster took on a new dimension. The detonation mixed together with the...usual noise. But the deafening crunch and screech of overstretched, tearing metal caught his attention despite the ubiquitous chaos. Mid-run, he turned around, froze, tripped over his own feet, and hit the ground.

He barely felt the impact, lifting himself up and wordlessly taking D'ihra's hand. She pulled him to his feet.

"Your world is ending," she said, and only now did he realize that Atlantis really did have no future. Everything would pass. Not a single Arkonide in the city could survive this inferno.

Atlan's tower tilted to the side like a tree that had just been felled.

Cracks spread over the lower third, and a hole many stories high gaped in the outer shell. The smoke mushroom of an explosion rose upwards and frayed in the storm, ignited by the heat of the flames. Over several meters in width, it allowed Feltif to see into the interior of the tower: floors, walls, fire, and shimmering, useless protective walls of pure energy.

The tower buckled before leaning farther and falling. It crashed down, crushing entire houses under it and cutting a path of destruction. Its outer wall burst open, meter-sized pieces of metal buzzing through the air, cutting buildings in two. The ground shook. Dust and rocks floated upward; the ground was torn open and devoured an entire street.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still, then more houses sank into the depths and were swallowed by the ground, which burst open in many places throughout the city. As if that wasn't enough, a hail of bombs fell and an Arkonide cruiser crashed into the rubble. A huge tidal wave raced from the shore, taking buildings, wrecks, trees, and corpses with it. Water shot out of the crevices as well.

At that moment, Feltif realized that they could not escape. Not on foot. Atlantis, the entire city, indeed the whole continent, would not survive these forces for much longer. He grabbed D'ihra and dragged her with him into the ruins of what had once been his house.

Demeira on Thanos

A large part of the convoy flew into space and tried to evade the remaining Methane ships. Only two units were still on the landing field in Atlantis and taking in more refugees. Demeira on Thanos was already relaxing on the bridge of the *Ektem* when the room was shaken and the sensors showed a multitude of new enemies.

Methane ships fell out of hyperspace—a second fleet with nearly a hundred more spacecraft. The fortunes of the battle had turned again, and this time there was no longer any doubt as to who would win. The Arkonides had lost. The exhausted military fleet had no chance.

"Commander on Thanos to all the commanders of the convoy!" she shouted over the radio. "Escape into translight flight! All warships are to protect civilian units. No one intervenes in the fight against the Methanes. I'll stay behind with the *Ektem* and protect the last units." Two more ships...two huge ships that could each accommodate at least a thousand refugees. They just needed someone to buy them a little time, and the *Ektem* was a powerful battleship.

"No!" was the response. "That's an order, Commander!" It was the commander-in-chief, Tarts de Telomar, from the *Tosoma*, and his voice sounded ice-cold. "You will flee with your convoy and take care of the protection of your ships that have already taken off."

“Two of my ships are not ready for takeoff yet! I won’t leave anyone behind!”

“You aren’t, Commander.” Now she heard understanding and pity in his voice, so pronounced that she could almost feel his pain herself. “I will personally take care of the protection of those left behind as long as I can. They will leave Atlantis before me or no one will.”

“Tarts, I—”

“Go! Now! That’s an order!”

On Thanos hesitated for just one more second, then she agreed. Taking control of the *Ektem* personally, she steered the warship along the course of the convoy, accelerating and destroying a Methane cruiser that had gone on the attack. The hundred new ships had not yet taken formation; this was their last chance to escape the densifying network of enemy vessels.

The *Ektem* broke through, protecting the flank of the convoy. Their presence alone chased away two smaller units, which set a direct course for Atlantis instead.

By radio, they received the orders that de Telomar addressed to his warships, while the *Ektem* and the convoy continued to accelerate to gain the necessary speed to move into translight space.

De Telomar instructed all his remaining ships to join the convoy and get to safety. Only he himself would stay behind to go with the *Tosoma* directly over Atlantis and protect the refugees until his last breath.

He was a good man. Perhaps the most valuable one that Arkon would lose in this horrific duel. How long had the chaos lasted? Minutes? Hours? She couldn’t tell.

The commander of the *Ektem* wept tears of excitement as she received confirmations from the various ships one by one. At the same time, the majority of the Methanes pounced on the convoy, trying to prevent their escape. The new warships fired incessantly at the attackers; the commanders submitted to on Thanos’s command without objection.

Only one ship defied de Telomar’s order and expressed it clearly, with the request that he approve their defiance. The last thing on Thanos received before she managed to move into translight with the convoy and the omnipresent death finally lagged behind her was the name of its commander: Cunor ter Pelgan.

He commanded the auxiliary craft *Tosoma II*.

Crest da Zoltral

The top of the falling tower would have killed Crest and his companions if they hadn't run fast enough. Now a gigantic pile of rubble loomed in front of them, dozens of meters high and many times as long. Water shot out of a fissure and formed a lake, the foothills of which still lapped at Trker-Hon's feet.

"To get to the shore and the dome, we would have to go...along there." Soptor's voice sounded toneless as she stretched her arm towards the incomprehensible pile of rubble. It was impossible to cross it. Mountains of metal and crushed houses prevented it, as did huge, raised mounds of dirt and the amounts of water that swelled out of the earth; no, even more, which flooded the breaking land masses from the sea.

Above them, the sky burned with rays of energy and bombs leaving deadly tracks.

"We're beaten," Crest said. He found no more hope in himself to encourage his companions. Only the bitter consolation that it would not be his illness that ended his life in agony.

"Not yet," replied a voice.

He turned around. He had not heard someone else coming. But he recognized the figure immediately, and the sight left him speechless.

It was Rico.

"Take us to the underwater dome," Soptor told him.

The robot with the appearance of an Arkonide offered a thin smile. "Follow me!"

Tarts de Telomar

Cunor ter Pelgan had the audacity to defy de Telomar's final order. The old Arkonide saw no reason to fight it; instead, he respected it. Ter Pelgan even asked to be allowed to carry out this breach of orders.

"Tarts," he shouted over the radio, "thank you for everything I have learned from you. I am now positioning the *Tosoma II*."

On the sensor holo, Tarts watched as the Methanes pounced on

Atlantis and intensified their bombardment. With targeted shots from the onboard weapons of his battleship, he kept at least a small area clear, a flight path so that the two remaining ships could take off. He sent the order to close their air locks immediately, no matter how many refugees had yet to enter. They had to take off now or they never would again.

Ter Pelgan flew risky maneuvers with his craft, crashing two Methane ships in the immediate vicinity of the spaceport. It offered additional precious seconds for the two units, which gave a clear message. They took off, ascending towards space.

De Telomar breathed a sigh of relief. The *Tosoma* and her auxiliary craft were still able to provide some protection during the acceleration phase, so that...

His thoughts faltered.

The *Tosoma II* had received one hit too many. Its protective shield collapsed. The shell began to burn. The ship trudged, sagged, and caught itself close to the earth's surface, racing over the burning city like a blazing torch before crashing.

I didn't think it would come to this, Cunor, thought de Telomar. *For a moment, I really believed the foolish words of the castaways who told me about a future that will never exist. I'm sorry you didn't survive after all. In the end, there is no predestination.*

The *Tosoma* was now under concentrated fire. Nevertheless, de Telomar tried to shield the two ascending ships until his last breath, even if it was pointless. It would never last long enough for the units to switch to translight flight. If the *Tosoma* fell, the civilian ships would be an easy victim for the Methanes.

De Telomar handed over the ship control to the positronics. Their objectives were clear: draw enemy fire, kill as many as possible. These maneuvers could also be performed by positronics in automatic mode.

He closed his eyes and gave the evacuation order. "The *Tosoma* will fall. The entire crew shall eject in combat gear. Fight your way through; seek refuge on the planet."

He himself did not move. It was pointless. He was an old man who would sink with his ship. That was his fate.

Someone grabbed him, the officer who had taken ter Pelgan's place on the bridge. "Commander!"

"Let go of me!"

"Come with me! The evacuation is our last hope of survival!"

Does no one pay attention to my commands anymore when they are uncomfortable? But in the face of death, the military leadership had obviously fallen apart. “Let go!” he repeated.

But the woman did not, instead talking to him and concluding with the words: “Then we’ll die together with the ship.”

That hit him in his core. “Leave the *Tosoma*! Immediately!”

“Not without you, Commander. I owe my life to you several times over. I’ll stay with you.” She held out her hand to him.

He cursed, and together they ran. They were the last to eject before the *Tosoma* crashed into the sea, half destroyed. The giant sank into the floods, its impact sending another infernal wave over the debris field, which hours ago had been a thriving, high-tech city. Now, nothing and no one lived there anymore. Bomb after bomb went down; whole chunks of debris and ground broke off and sank into the raging spray.

De Telomar in his battledress floated on the water, just like the rest of his crew; though most were already dead, killed by the Methane energy beams, which systematically wiped out everyone.

Do you know it, the path to the Planet of Eternal Life? Maybe he knew something better. Perhaps death offered true infinity, without war, without pain, and without suffering.

He was seized by a strange calm. Death, the old companion so familiar to him, would finally come for him.

De Telomar closed his eyes, imagining he was in a different, better place.

And waited.

Feltif de Khemrol

Feltif led D’ihra through an underground annex to his house: a small hangar, just big enough to accommodate his private one-person ship. The noise of the destruction reached them, muffled, but in the long run this place would not offer any protection.

“It’s a tiny flying ship,” he explained as he opened the cockpit door to the pilot’s seat. “Normally just for me. It will carry both of us.”

“I don’t want to leave this world,” said D’ihra. “Neither in the big ship nor in this tiny boat with you.”

He laughed for the first time since the sinking had begun. “We

can't do that with this ship anyway. But it can fly us out of Atlantis, over the forests and the sea, to the next safe place."

"So this ship can save our lives?"

He nodded. "Exactly. At our destination, somewhere far away, we'll get out, and I'll send the ship back to this place, where it will be destroyed. I won't take anything with me into our new life. Nothing that will remind me of all this."

He climbed into the pilot's seat and threw out equipment, making room for D'ihra to crouch next to him, then closed the cockpit.

"We will fly over the forest, as low as possible. If we... If you are lucky, our enemies won't discover us. If they do, we'll die."

She took his hand.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"If you are."

He was. As ready as never before in his life. He was almost amazed that the radio signal could still open the exit in the ceiling of the hangar.

Feltif activated the ship, took control, and ascended. As soon as they were outside, they saw a blazing wall of flame in front of them. The edge of the forest was burning. Something howled, so loud that they could hear it inside the craft. A bomb fell and finally shredded his house. He accelerated so fast, into the middle of the flames, that the sudden pressure pressed him into the seat and D'ihra groaned in pain. The absorbers regulated it as they pierced the wall of fire and looked out on a glorious blue sky that gave no hint of the inferno raging behind them.

He would only have to turn around to see it. But he didn't.

His former life as Tato of Atlantis was over.

"Don't look back," said Feltif de Khemrol.

Tarts de Telomar

Instead of the darkness of death, glaring light and the thunder of explosions brought him back to life and the present.

Tarts, who only wanted peace and tranquility so that he would no longer have to see his helpless crew vaporized by enemies, could not believe his eyes.

Methane ships passed. They exploded in rows. A dozen

spherical ships pounced on them, firing and destroying. Tractor beams grabbed the surviving Arkonides in their space suits and pulled them aboard the battleships. De Telomar even felt himself being pulled in by the tractor beam. Before the bulkhead closed behind him, he saw with a military look practiced thousands of times that the Methanes were apparently too surprised to take consistent action against the sudden onslaught of Arkonide ships.

"We are outnumbered."

He heard exactly the voice he had expected. Demeira on Thanos was standing in the air lock. She was bleeding from a wound on her shoulder.

"We got into a little battle," she explained. "I gave up command and let myself be treated by a med robot. My last order was: return. The civilian ships are safe in the shadow of a nearby sun. As soon as we have collected all the survivors, we will flee again before the Methanes adjust to the new situation. There is nothing more we can do for Atlantis. No one in the city could have survived."

"You shouldn't have done that," he said tonelessly. "You shouldn't have come back!"

"I've done it before," on Thanos said. "And in the end, you praised me for it, Tarts de Telomar."

Crest da Zoltral

Rico had led them unerringly on winding paths and through underground corridors through a labyrinth of destruction to their destination. The robot seemed to be able to orient itself in the chaos without any difficulty.

Now they were finally standing in the dome, in deceptive silence. The air smelled clean and clear.

"This is the only place that will not be destroyed," said Crest. "We are safe."

"But we cannot stay here and wait passively," Michalovna added.

The transmitter loomed in front of them, an outwardly inconspicuous piece of technology and yet the greatest possible temptation. With it, their odyssey had begun, exactly at this point, only an unimaginably long time in the future. Atlantis had passed; an entire continent had sunk in the immediate vicinity, yet this

enclave would survive everything.

"Go through the transmitter," Rico told them. The robot seemed flawless on the outside, as if it had never been injured or destroyed. It used a switch, activating the strange device. "I'll stay here."

"You're not coming with us?" asked Trker-Hon.

The robot pointed at the transmitter. "A different task awaits me here. I have only one request. Watch over Quiniu!"

Crest moved closer. "Where will the device take us when we walk through it?"

"To the place of your longing," Rico replied.

While the Arkonide was still pondering this cryptic response, something else came to his mind. "Rico, I beg you one last answer."

"Ask!"

"In my time, you were on Venus. With Thora, you came to Earth, where you were destroyed and regenerated. Then, you went through this very transmitter with Quiniu Soptor and arrived in this time period...and, in your own words, you want to stay here. So you'll go through time again. A perfect loop. Are there several copies of you? Not just a robot like you named Rico?"

The artificial and yet so vivid face turned to him. "I don't know what you're talking about. Should I know the future?"

"But you—"

"There is no time to discuss it. Once again, the place of your longing awaits you. Go through the transmitter!"

And they did.

Later
Desolate and empty

He touched the chain, and he felt as if his fingers would refuse to move.

A dream? Had the last few days been just a dream?

Warmth spread through his chest, through his clothes to deep under the skin, which crawled with the odd sensation.

He looked at the tiny wound close to the nail of his thumb. A trifle that he neither felt nor would have noticed, if it weren't for the...healing. Carefully, he felt it. The small cut, not even so deep that it had bled more than a single drop, closed.

Slowly he raised his hand, brought his thumb close to his eyes,

so close that he could barely see it clearly. And wasn't that a little closer than had always been possible?

He saw how the edges of the wound closed, how skin cells grew.

A dream.

He was absolutely sure that this was not reality, but on the other hand, his thoughts were far too clear, clearer than ever, for him to sleep. He remembered the past few days with absolute precision. Much too detailed, in colors far too rich. He could still smell them. The smell hung in his clothes, in his long white hair.

Now he touched the egg-shaped device that he wore on a chain around his neck. Fleetingly, he felt the warmth on his fingers, felt his own pulse, which this thing seemed to have. It was more than technology. So much more.

It gave him immortality, or so he had been promised.

Only with difficulty did Atlan tear himself away from these new impressions and confusing feelings, back to the present, to the bridge on the *Tosoma IX*. He had just flown into the system that came closer to being home than any other spot in the universe outside of Arkon.

Larsaf III, Atlantis, his colony.

When the first sensor images appeared on the holos, he stared at them, completely motionless. He didn't seem able to blink for an eternity. The image was burned into his retinas, just as everything must have burned in Atlantis.

Again he reached for the chain around his neck. *Immortal? Me? Why?* He had anticipated what awaited him, but that didn't change his shock.

It was not a dream. None of that. And this is the price of war. He guided the *Tosoma IX* into orbit around the planet, and feelings of guilt seemed to want to suffocate him. Should he have stayed? Should he have never left Atlantis?

The sea swayed calmly; occasionally, pieces of wood and other floating debris washed by. He didn't want to know what it was, but the locals mercilessly tore many things out of watery chaos, such as wreckage or corpses.

Atlan's fingers routinely stroked the holo input surfaces of the control panel, and the *Tosoma IX* landed on one of the tiny islands left from the continent that had fallen victim to the Methanes. They lay like scattered lumps of earth in the vastness of the sea.

He had abandoned his duties when he'd flown away from Atlantis. It had been incompatible with his values. But he had gained something incomparably more valuable than this colony had ever possessed. The sober, inhuman logic of this consideration wanted to tear his heart apart. How heavy did Atlantis and all its inhabitants weigh compared to the entire Great Empire of the Arkonides? How significant was their victory over the Methanes?

Atlan had been gone for a few days, and now he was not only carrying the device that gave him immortality, but also plans for a weapon that would give the Empire superiority over their enemy. He had already transmitted the plans of this so-called converter gun to the High Command. A first relay station had confirmed its safe arrival.

He shut down the systems of the *Tosoma IX*. It was getting dark around him. Only a last emergency light illuminated the path.

He left the bridge, walked on, listening to the sound of his footsteps echoing off the corridor walls. No one but him was on board.

A ghost ship, as well as the ghosts of the past, hovering over the sunken continent.

Atlan left the craft via the bottom air lock, heard the clack with which the outer bulkhead closed again, went to the shore of the small island, sat down on the ground, and waited.

But the creature that had sent him on this strange journey did not come to him.

He stared at the sea, listening, as if it were possible to hear the past in the sound of the waves, as if he could witness the demise of the colony, the death of all the Arkonides who had served him. He wanted to feel their pain, feel their extinguishing life, so they could accuse him.

He waited for a submarine to emerge from the waves, but it did not come. Instead, at some point, someone else staggered across the beach towards him. Atlan jumped up and ran to the Arkonide, whose uniform hung tattered on his body. His face had burns, his hair was charred, his left hand crusted with blood.

Before the two men met, the stranger collapsed and remained motionless. Atlan reached him, bent down, and was relieved to find that he was still alive and had only lost consciousness.

He knew this face. Cunor ter Pelgan! What had happened to

him?

"Leave that to me, Exalted One."

A voice suddenly rang out from behind him. He whirled around and saw the being he had expected, who had previously sent him on his mission without revealing anything about itself. The submarine Atlan had been waiting for was in the surf.

"Who are you?" asked Atlan. "You are not an Arkonide!"

"No."

"What are you?"

"Your servant. My name is Rico. Come, Atlan da Gonozal."

The creature gently picked up ter Pelgan and went back to the submarine.

"Now come, Atlan! I have prepared everything for your task."

"Nothing but an expectation; eternal helplessness."
Franz Kafka, diary entry on March 15, 1914

EPISODE 24: WORLD OF ETERNITY
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Frank Borsch

1.

Crest da Zoltral

A heartbeat later, they were in paradise again.

Crest da Zoltral came to a halt. He stayed frozen in place for a moment, as if he couldn't grasp what had happened. Then he slowly turned around. From the transmitter's columns shot gleaming fountains of pure energy that united to form an arch of light. Within the archway was blackness beyond measure, swallowing up the light in some inexplicable manner. The transmitter was the gateway to another dimension, another place.

The arch dissolved and the darkness disappeared as if it had never existed. The transparent dome on the bed of the Atlantic, the Arkonide colony of Atlantis that had perished before their very eyes...the Earth of the past, the suffering and death of the colonists —it was all behind them for good.

A drawn-out chirping came from the side. It resembled that of a cricket from Earth, only deeper and more powerful. The sound was made by Trker-Hon, the Topsidan who had become a treasured companion over the last few weeks.

Crest had never heard a noise like that from the lizard being's mouth. The translator implanted in his nervous system didn't translate it. However, he had no hesitation in reading it as a sound of astonishment.

Because this place was astonishing.

It was warm. A yellow sun, close enough to reach out and touch, was shining down on Crest and his companions. The transmitter they'd stepped through stood atop a hill in the midst of an area paved with irregular stone slabs. Columns several meters high bordered the area, but neither walls nor a ceiling obscured their view. The Arkonide was reminded of a ruined Greek temple he'd visited on Earth.

At the foot of the hill was a city.

"Trker-Hon," said Crest, turning to the Topsidan, who was

regarded as a Wise One in his culture. “Please tell me I’m not dreaming!”

“You’re not dreaming, Crest. Even if it feels that way.” The lizard ran a hand over the red cloth eye patch he wore over one eye. “A dream has come true.”

“It has,” Tatiana Michalovna confirmed. She was keeping Quiniu Soptor stable with one hand. “Your—*our*—dream has become a reality.”

A very special dream. A dream that had kept Crest under its spell for many years. The dream of life. Eternal life.

Could it be real? Had they reached their goal?

A sense of lightness came over Crest. This world boasted low gravity, perhaps half as strong as on Earth. It did the Arkonide good. He was an old, mortally ill man who had withstood strains far beyond anything he should have demanded of his body. But he had taken on every strain, every risk, to get to this place. He’d left Earth behind, betraying his foster daughter, Thora, who almost meant more to him than his own life.

And now he was here.

His pulse accelerated, pounded. He’d done it! It was as if all the weight of his previous life had fallen away from him. Crest da Zoltral was a marked man. A man of exceptional intellect and incomparable candor. A radical thinker who felt beholden to the truth, and only the truth. A herald of uncomfortable truths, an opponent of the regent, a fighter who had desperately tried to hold back his culture’s seemingly inevitable downfall.

Rico didn’t lie, his extra sense remarked. *He said you’d find yourselves in the “place of your longing.”*

His thought-brother’s voice sounded light and serene like Crest had never heard it before. Since his youth, the extra sense had been a part of him, but usually not a pleasant one. It was a taunter and admonisher, an instigator and “smart-ass,” as the humans would have put it. His extra sense was never lacking in a remark that could destroy all the magic of the moment. But even it was entranced by the magic of this place.

Crest moved away from his companions, who were fixed where they stood, as if afraid that any hasty movement could expose this as a mere dream. The Arkonide climbed a few steps up onto an irregularly carved stone block to get a better view. The green hills stretched to the horizon. Thick woods grew on them, only

occasionally broken up by irregular clearings. On one hilltop, a rock towered up from among the vegetation, reminding Crest of an obelisk from Earth.

A city lay in the valley. Its buildings followed the course of a meandering river, also lining the countless tributaries. The houses were flat, detached constructions. They glimmered like jewels in the sunlight. In one direction—west in human terms, judging by the sun—the hilly landscape transitioned into a plain. A landing site there disappeared into the haze. A handful of small aircraft or spacecraft were scattered over the surface. Their arrangement seemed arbitrary.

To the east, Crest could just about see water on the horizon. A lake? Or an ocean? More likely the latter, he decided. The warm wind brushing against his skin carried salty, fragrant air to him.

This was the Planet of Eternal Life.

The thought gave him goose bumps on his forearms. What would they...

A tortured groan tore him out of his thoughts. He forced himself to pull his gaze away from the city and turn around. The groaning was coming from Quiniu Soptor. The half-Arkonide had once been a crew member on the *Aetron*, the research ship that had left Crest stranded on Earth's Moon during his search for immortality.

The elderly Arkonide jumped off the stone block with the lightness the low gravity afforded him and went over to her. Michalovna, the human telepath, was holding her steady with both hands on her shoulders. The half-Arkonide's skin was dark. Instead of hair, a rust-red plumage of feathers covered her head. Crest recalled that on the *Aetron*, Soptor had spent a lot of time on her appearance. Now, holes gaped in the plumage, exposing scabbed, unhealthy-looking skin on her head. The remaining feathers were clumped together, their former luster gone. He felt sorry for her.

Your sympathy is misplaced, his extra sense whispered, having evidently recovered its usual emotional state. *She's a deserter.*

Then we're in the same boat, Crest replied. *Or do you think an Arkonide tribunal would look kindly on me for putting myself in the humans' hands rather than eliminating Rhodan and his crew on the Moon? For giving those savages access to our knowledge?*

Aside from him and Thora, Soptor was the only survivor from the *Aetron*, which had been destroyed by cowardly humans. But

instead of joining him and Thora, the half-Arkonide had gone through the transmitter in the underwater dome alongside Rico, the robot. This was weeks before the untreatable cancer growing in Crest had driven him to irrevocably leave his old life behind in the same way.

Whatever you call what she did, his logic sector reported back after an uncommonly long pause, *it didn't go well for her.*

Crest stopped in front of Soptor. He tried to make eye contact with her, but her eyes, with their silver irises, were dull, as if they weren't taking in their surroundings—or as if she was still caught up in what they'd been through.

Crest looked back on his own experiences. How much suffering had they had to witness during their odyssey through time and space? How many hardships had they endured? How often had they believed their lives were lost?

"What's wrong with her?" His question was directed at Michalovna. The telepath was now supporting Soptor with both hands under her armpits, as if handling a drunk...or a large doll.

"She's afraid," the human woman replied.

"Why? She has nothing to be afraid of. We've reached our journey's end! This has to be the Planet of Eternal Life."

"Maybe that's exactly why?" Her tone was cutting.

What was with Michalovna? Didn't she feel the grandeur of this place? Crest scrutinized her. Although she had once blackmailed him with her knowledge of the *Aetron*'s true mission, he had learned to like and appreciate the young woman. She was a sensitive, vulnerable character, and yet sometimes harder and more unyielding than even his extra sense. A consequence of her telepathic gift, he assumed. She possessed abilities that the average person could only dream of, but in return, she was denied the merciful ignorance of what other people thought about her. The telepath had to protect herself, and she often did it with hardness towards herself and others.

"I don't know what we'd have to fear here, of all places," Crest replied. "There must be another reason for Soptor's—"

An exclamation interrupted him. "Crest! Tatiana! Look!"

Trker-Hon was pointing to the landing site with one of his powerful arms. An aircraft had lifted off and was en route to the hill. It was silently flying closer.

"Someone's coming to welcome us!" Trker-Hon cried.

“Yes, that must be it,” Crest concurred. Suddenly, a certain unease took hold of him too. Images appeared in his mind. A few days prior, they had stepped out of a transmitter like this one on the half-planet Tramp. An arrowhead-shaped glider had risen up from the nearest city. The insectoid Orgh Gal-Enn had greeted them with deference, but within hours, they’d feared for their lives.

Don’t let the woman drive you crazy! his extra sense whispered. *Tramp is far behind us! The similarities are superficial and mere coincidence!*

Its tone sounded excessively caustic to Crest. His extra sense found Michalovna strange and uncanny. The telepath threatened to rob it of the “unfathomable entity” status on which its self-conception rested. But in this case, his thought-brother was right. Tramp had been a dying planet, a world of death. This was a world of life. Eternal life. Michalovna was seeing specters.

“Soon, we’ll come face-to-face with immortality,” Trker-Hon said. “How will it look, I wonder?”

“Nothing like we expect, I imagine.”

The aircraft touched down next to the square in the same silence with which it glided through the air. Its shape resembled a drop of water. The underside of its hull was cobalt blue, the top gleaming silver. Crest could just make out the silhouettes of two beings among this gleaming, one of them small like a child.

Suddenly, an opening formed in the vehicle. An immortal stepped out.

He looked like a human.

How was this possible? The immortals who had set up the transmitter network... Were they humans? Or Arkonides? The very idea was absurd. Crest had come to think highly of humans, but their civilization was primitive, never expanding beyond the narrow borders of their homeworld. They dreamed of immortality in their religions, but nothing more. Even Arkonides and their countless descendants had been denied victory over death despite their fabulously advanced technology.

The immortal came over to them. He was tall and thin and wearing a one-piece outfit. It glowed in the sun’s yellow light, took on a dark tone when he passed through a column’s shadow, then changed to yellow again.

He stopped before Crest and Trker-Hon. “Welcome to Wanderer, honored ones!” he said, raising a hand in greeting. Crest

registered that his fingernails transitioned seamlessly into the flesh. He registered the greenish blue eyes, the sand-colored hair that seemed to glow with its own light. And he registered the language: the immortal had greeted them in the Arkonide tongue!

A trembling overcame him. His mouth suddenly dried out. His mind raced, desperately searching for a response worthy of the situation.

Then he heard a scream behind him. Sharp, chaotic, tortured. He was about to turn to see who the scream had come from when a figure shot past him.

It was dark-skinned. Its head was covered in patchy rust-red feathers.

Quiniu Soptor. Indescribable hate glinted in her silvery irises. And the object of her hate was the immortal one.

2.

Carfesch

"Carfesch! Wanderer is up ahead!"

The ship pulled the scout out of his reverie. Carfesch hadn't slept—for so long now that he couldn't have said how sleep felt anymore.

"Thank you," he said. The syllables came only slowly from his lipless mouth. His state of reverie left him far away from things. Maybe that was why he preferred it to sleep. In sleep, he dreamed of Inkadye. He held her in his arms, ever so tightly. Clutched her to himself. But as hard as he struggled, she slipped away from him.

"Everything okay?" the ship asked. "Your vital signs—"

"Are my business, and mine alone!" His attention abruptly returned. "You're overstepping your authority."

"I am merely following my conscience. I—"

"You don't know what you're talking about, ship!" he said, cutting off the computer. "Show me the Planet of Eternal Life!"

Instantly, the walls of the small, sparsely furnished cabin disappeared. Carfesch was surrounded by space again. It was as if he were floating out there, without a protective suit, completely on his own. Stars hung in the blackness. Tiny beacons, uniform and yet inviting. He spun on his axis and made out one point of light, bigger than the others.

Wanderer.

Carfesch thought back to Ambur. To the elderly Thort whose last moments he had shared. "The pattern of the stars is frozen music," the three-eyed Ferron had said to him.

The stars were the last thing the Vega system's ruler had seen. That system was one of the most magnificent and yet most wretched places Carfesch had ever become aware of. Magnificent because the enormous bluish white sun had gathered a flock of forty-three planets with hundreds of moons around them. Life flourished on at least half a dozen of those worlds in such variety

that it seemed to Carfesch like a symbol of the variety of life.

Wretched because the Ferrons hadn't appreciated this gift the universe had given them. Instead of delighting in their home's magnificence, they'd blanketed each other with war, had brought themselves, and life itself, to the brink of extinction. The war that the Ferrons called the Dark Age was now at an end thanks to the Thort, and thanks to Carfesch's actions. Only...

"You're sad," the ship determined.

"No, pensive."

"The Thort?"

"I don't want to..." he began, but then thought better of it. The ship would see through him anyway. "Yes, the Thort," he admitted.

"I'm not an organic being," the ship said, "but it seems to me that a better, more fulfilling life than Thort Guall lived is hardly possible. He was once a simple lad, a cripple, destined to meet an early, violent end in the Ferrons' war. Instead, he rose to be the ruler of all Ferrons, bringing the Dark Age to an end. His third eye allowed him to see things and gain insights that would normally remain closed off to organic life-forms." The ship stayed silent for a few seconds, as if it needed that time to think. Which it didn't, of course. It had just learned the effectiveness of rhetorical pauses from Carfesch. "The Thort's life had a purpose. Why do you mourn him?"

"You wouldn't understand," Carfesch said.

"How arrogant of you."

"Not at all!"

"No? Then prove it!"

The glowing speck that Carfesch took to be Wanderer had come closer. It was now about the size of a fist he might form with one of his seven-fingered hands—carefully, of course, to avoid hurting himself with his own claws.

The scout gave himself a start. What did he have to lose? The ship was his only companion. If he couldn't confide in it, what was the point of his existence? "The Thort didn't die in peace," he said.

"He should have done," the ship argued. "He had every cause to. But what do a few moments of despair mean in the face of a fulfilled existence? They're of no consequence."

The ship really didn't understand him. Not in this regard. But maybe in another? "The Thort didn't want to die!"

"No organic life-form wants to die. But they all die at some

point. Even those who are immortal. But the Thort was allowed to live on."

"Another called the Thort took his place!"

"Making him immortal, no? What constitutes the Thort is his work. The new Thort will seamlessly continue the first's mission. And his successors will do the same for many generations. What more do you want, Carfesch?"

The point of light representing Wanderer had now split into two.

The ship's question echoed in his thoughts. What more *did* he want? Answers? Carfesch had served *it* for a long time, with steadfast loyalty. But Carfesch was no blind follower. The scout was an attentive observer, a being who wasn't satisfied with first impressions. Carfesch dug to the root of things.

It had set up transmitters all over the Vega system. Carfesch's master had ensured that Guall would gain access to the network. And, with help from these devices that enabled instant teleportation from world to world, Guall had ascended to the position of Thort, ended the Dark Age, and brought peace to the Ferrons.

Only, why had *it* allowed the Ferrons' war to begin with? Wouldn't it have been easier to prevent it?

Carfesch thought back over a century—to Reyan, Vega's seventh planet, a water world of enchanting beauty. The scout's ship had been shot down over its oceans, and he'd have drowned if a humanoid associated with a man named Perry Rhodan hadn't saved him from the wreckage. Rhodan had been stranded in space and time with a handful of companions and had nonetheless tried to persuade the conference of rebels that had begun the Ferrons' war to make peace. In vain, of course—Rhodan was just an ordinary life-form. In stark contrast to *it*.

Wanderer was so close now that Carfesch could make out details. He was looking at a blue and green world with several lush continents and wide, deep-blue seas. One of the two artificial suns orbiting Wanderer was preparing to switch to the far side, while the second's light was already forming a radiant halo that made the near side appear to be in sharp contrast.

It would have been trivial for the ship to send out probes to record the planet's far side as well. But that was out of the question. Such an action did not please *it*.

What did please *it* was letting the Ferrons butcher each other

for over a century.

"Are you thinking about Perry Rhodan?"

"Yes."

"You shouldn't have let him and his companions enter me on Ambur," the ship rebuked him.

"Rhodan saved my life on Reyan before you and I came to each other. I'm following my conscience. I'm in his debt."

"That may well be. But do you honestly believe you can pay back your debt in this way? Rhodan will die; you know that. His companions will die." The ship inserted another rhetorical pause. "And you will die, Carfesch!"

He would die. He looked inside himself, observed his reaction to those words. He did it with a cold, almost disconcerting distance. The notion of death, he confirmed, didn't scare him. He would...

Suddenly, a haze came over the scout's perception. The lights of the stars, Wanderer, and its two suns melted away before his eyes. It was as if Carfesch were looking at his environment through a pane of glass with water pouring down it during a violent thunderstorm. The scout felt like the ground was giving way beneath his feet, like he was falling. He sank to his knees, extended his arms, and used both hands to prop himself up against the floor, which still existed. A stabbing pain drove into his neck and...

And his usual perception returned.

Nothing appeared to have changed, with one small, apparently unimportant exception: the artificial suns' positions had suddenly shifted. Only one could be seen now, hanging almost directly above what *it* called the gleaming city. The other was behind Wanderer now, beaming on the planet from the other side.

But appearances were deceiving. This exception was of great importance. Everything had changed.

"We have completed a time jump," the ship reported.

"What? Where to, and how far?"

"Thirty years into the past," the ship said with an indifference that was no act. The craft was highly advanced, but it remained a machine. One time period was as good as any other.

"Why?" Carfesch asked.

"*It* gives no justifications," the ship lectured him. "You know that. I merely obeyed a remote impulse. Your agitation is unreasonable; your vital signs are at levels not conducive to your well-being."

“As I told you, my vital signs are none of your business!” he snapped.

“It’s Rhodan,” the ship replied as if he hadn’t heard the admonishment. “He’s weighing on you. Should I put him and his people into entanglement? The two Ferrons, Garrean and Shim, are —”

“No.”

“You’d prefer immediate elimination?”

“No!” Carfesch bellowed.

“Your resistance is unreasonable. It would be better that way. For you and for Rhodan. I assure you, he and his companions won’t suffer as they die. That’s important to you, isn’t it?”

“No!” Carfesch repeated. “I don’t want Rhodan to die! Don’t do anything to him and his companions. Understood?”

“No, I have not understood. I will follow your order nonetheless. But don’t say I didn’t warn you!”

Carfesch refrained from replying to that. He carefully got up, holding his arms out as if he didn’t trust the ground beneath his feet any longer.

Wanderer was within reach now. The artificial sun illuminated the majority of the planet’s near side. Only a thin black crescent ran along the edge. That area would be experiencing the short, ghostly pale night phase.

The Planet of Eternal Life.

It would grant Carfesch a sliver of immortality on Wanderer’s far side. It was high time for the scout; he felt it in his bones, where a pain had taken hold that no medicine the ship could offer would be able to erase.

For a moment, Wanderer grew blurry again. But this time, the ship wasn’t completing a jump through time. Instead, a lifelike depiction appeared before the scout, obscuring his view of the planet.

A humanoid being had appeared before him. A hasty observer could have mistaken it for a human like Perry Rhodan, but the scout had sharp eyes. The perfection of the being he saw now would have betrayed its nature even if he hadn’t known it for a long time.

The being was a machine.

“Homunk!” Carfesch asserted in lieu of a greeting. “What do you want from me?”

“Your report, scout.” The machine offered no greeting either.

“But make it brief! I’m on the way to welcome some honored one.”

“My mission is complete,” the scout answered tersely. He was happy not to have to waste too many words. “The Thort’s dynasty is assured and with it, peace among the Ferrons. Planet Ambur was transferred to us by the first Thort. Preparations are going according to plan. Ambur will shortly be on the path *it* has determined.”

Carfesch spared no thought for the fact that his report concerned events thirty years in the future from his current time point. For *it*, terms like “past” and “future” had no meaning. *It* altered his present as he saw fit.

“Good.” Homunk made a brief gesture to signal satisfaction. “Now, go and land!”

“I will.”

Homunk’s outline melted away and then regained sharpness as the machine turned its attention to the scout once again.

“Any unusual occurrences?” Homunk asked.

“No,” Carfesch lied, hoping it would fail to notice his hesitation, his voice’s marginally higher pitch. Or wouldn’t read into them, at least. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” Homunk disappeared, this time for good.

Carfesch felt a tingling under his claws. It came from the tiny symbiotes that lived there and fed on the dead, callused scales of his skin. They could sense his anxiety.

“That was not clever of you,” said the ship, more softly than usual. The computer, too, first had to work through what it had heard. Carfesch had crossed a line. “Homunk is watching you closely. He’s felt for a long time that you aren’t a good servant of *it*. Sooner or later, your lie will be revealed, and then—”

“It will not!” Carfesch said, interrupting. “Not if you follow my orders. Now land already!”

The ship obeyed.

3.

Homunk

What is she doing here? She should never have been allowed to come back!

Homunk's thoughts turned somersaults as the woman ran towards him. She had her arms stretched far forward, her long fingers reminding him of a predator's claws.

The Intotronic didn't react visibly. To the casual observer, Homunk looked like an organic being, weak and vulnerable. But he was a machine. Nothing that this woman with madness and hate in her eyes could muster could threaten him.

What's Rico doing? the Intotronic wondered. *Why did he permit this?*

Two steps still separated him from the woman. Homunk observed and analyzed her. He registered her sparse and dulled plumage of feathers, the dirt under her long, cracked fingernails; he smelled her pungent sweat.

He felt sorry for Quiniu Soptor.

Homunk raised his arms to intercept his attacker, to hold her in place until her strength waned. But it didn't come to that. A second figure came out from inside the glider and leaped at Soptor.

"Jymenah, no!" cried Homunk, who had recognized the motion from its very inception. He used the language of his master, which was unknown to the honored ones who had just arrived on Wanderer.

Jymenah didn't listen. The dwarf rammed the half-Arkonide in the stomach at full force. Soptor screamed. Then her scream turned into a powerless groan, her eyes bulging in their sockets, and she buckled. The dwarf and the half-Arkonide formed a knot rolling over the floor, coming to a stop a few meters from Homunk.

For a moment, neither stirred; it seemed as though the dwarf had killed the woman with her headbutt. Then Soptor reared up. She grabbed Jymenah, driving her nails into the dwarf's flesh. The

latter roared in pain and surprise.

"Jymenah, stop!" Homunk effortlessly drowned out his servant's cries.

The dwarf didn't listen. She grabbed Soptor, shaking her like a doll. Jymenah looked like a child, but a strength dwelled in her that always amazed Homunk. She could have torn the half-Arkonide to pieces even though the latter was twice her size—and would do so in seconds if Homunk didn't stop her. In her rage, Jymenah really was like a child. She didn't have any boundaries, just as her dismay at what she had done would know no bounds afterwards. But by then it would be too late. Even *it* couldn't bring the dead back to life.

Homunk had to intervene. But should he really?

The Intotronic paused for thought. Wouldn't it be better for all involved if Quiniu Soptor died at this moment? The tragic victim of a fit of anger from a flawed, organic servant? It would save Homunk a lot of effort. But it would also violate what he'd stood for since the beginning of his existence. Serving *it* meant putting his own concerns on the back burner.

Quiniu Soptor had come to Wanderer via transmitter. She had passed his master's test. She was an honored one. It was not up to Homunk to decide the half-Arkonide's fate. Only *It* could do that.

"Enough!"

He jumped forward, separating the two fighters with a quick arm motion. Neither the dwarf nor the madwoman could stand up to his machine strength.

"But she—" Jymenah bellowed, interrupting herself when her rage collapsed in on itself. "Sorry. I only wanted to protect you!"

"I don't need your protection," the Intotronic admonished her. "And I gave you clear instructions to stay in the glider." He let go of Jymenah. There was no danger from her anymore. Her anger had burned out, replaced by endless dismay. For a few hours, she would follow his orders to the letter.

Homunk turned to Soptor. The half-Arkonide looked at him through widened eyes. Again, she reared up with a cry, but her strength was spent. Her eyes suddenly grew empty. The tension left her body, and she slumped over. Homunk held her so she didn't fall onto the ground.

"Let go of Quiniu!" The second woman in the honored ones' group had stepped over to him. "Leave her alone!"

Homunk did as she demanded. He found it uncomfortable to have to touch the half-Arkonide.

Soptor tipped over, but the other woman caught her and laid her softly on the ground. “Quiniu?” she whispered. “Are you all right?”

Soptor didn’t respond. She had lost consciousness.

Homunk answered instead. “Your...” He searched for the right phrasing. “Your companion is in a weak state. I can help her.”

“Don’t touch her!”

“I assure you, I have no ill intentions—”

“Oh, really? Then why did she go at you like that? Why did your...your creature come a hair’s breadth away from killing her?”

She doesn’t know what happened to Quiniu Soptor! Homunk realized with relief. “I can’t answer your first question,” he lied. “I’d like to apologize for my servant’s imprudent behavior. Jymenah is overzealous at times. But I’d impress upon you that she was merely trying to protect her master.”

The woman snorted disdainfully and pointedly bent down over the unconscious Soptor.

Homunk refrained from any rebuke for her lack of respect. For as long as he could remember, he’d greeted the honored ones who appeared on Wanderer via transmitter. A multitude of them had already faced him. Beings who could not have been more different in both their physical presence and way of thinking. What unified them was that they had passed the tests that *it* imposed on those searching for the Planet of Eternal Life.

The tests brought the seekers to the limits of their capabilities...and beyond. If they made it to Wanderer, the pressure they’d been under often broke through. Homunk had already been insulted, threatened, and even attacked on many occasions. Without ever being put in serious danger, of course.

“Please excuse Tatiana’s impoliteness.” The old man with white hair had walked over to Homunk. “Our nerves are somewhat frayed. We’ve been through a lot over the last few weeks.”

“I’m well aware, honored one. There’s no need for any apology.”

The old man delivered a light bow. “I am Crest da Zoltral from Arkon,” he introduced himself. “I’m a Derengar and a member of the...” The Arkonide stopped short. He smiled and rolled his eyes as if mocking himself. “I think,” he then said, “these categories have

little meaning in this place, no?"

"Your old life is behind you," Homunk confirmed. "Finally."

Crest da Zoltral was an unusually old man. Most of the candidates for immortality were young and robust. And healthy. But this Arkonide was ill. His skin was stretched over hollow cheeks. It was so thin that Homunk could practically see the bones beneath the flesh. How had he possibly managed to withstand the tests?

"That's good," Crest replied. He seemed to be talking more to himself than to Homunk. For a few moments, the Arkonide stood lost in his thoughts; then his attention returned to the here and now. "May I introduce my companions?" He looked towards the woman who was both holding Quiniu Soptor in her arms and glaring at Jymenah with a gaze so penetrating that the dwarf put her hands in front of her head to protect herself and whimpered softly. "Tatiana Michalovna comes from Earth, and she's... But we wanted to leave out all that, didn't we?"

Crest turned to the lizard, who wore a cloth patch over one eye, as if he belonged to a primitive civilization that didn't know how to replace nonfunctional sight organs. Or had he lost the eye during one of the tests? If so, that was tragic but a small price to pay for the prospect of immortality.

"Trker-Hon comes from Topsid."

The Topsidan gave no indication of having heard Crest. He stood there, rigid, his eyes staring aimlessly. Homunk was not surprised. True, he'd never met a Topsidan, but he had met dozens of members of other lizard species. Common to all of them was this rigidity that disturbed intelligent life-forms descended from mammals. The lizards' body language was alien to them; they didn't interpret it as a lack of expression. Homunk, the machine, recognized an affinity in that.

The lizard followed Crest's example, immediately bowing. "It's a pleasure to meet you," he said. "You are?"

"Homunk. The First Servant of *it*."

"*It*?" Crest repeated, drawing out the syllable. The Arkonide was clearly hearing his master's name for the first time. "Is *it* the master of this world?"

"Yes. *It* is the master of Wanderer. Among other things."

"And Wanderer is the Planet of Eternal Life?"

"It is," Homunk confirmed.

Awestruck silence met the Intotronic's revelation. Crest trembled. The color drained from his already pale face. The lizard Trker-Hon hurried to the old man's side to support him. Michalovna's hand, which had been stroking the unconscious Soptor, now stiffened above the half-Arkonide's heart. The woman fixed Homunk with her penetrating gaze.

"*It* awards eternal life?" Crest whispered the question as if he had to force himself to ask it. As if he feared receiving a negative reply.

"If he sees fit."

"Who is *it*?" Michalovna asked.

"*It* is."

"That doesn't tell us anything!" the woman retorted. The fingers of her hand had grasped the material covering the unconscious woman's chest and screwed it up in her fist.

"It's the only answer I can give you," Homunk told her truthfully. Adequately describing *it* was impossible even to him.

"When can we see *it*?" the Topsidan asked.

"As soon as *it* sees fit." He raised a hand and pointed to the glider he'd taken from the city to the transmitter. "I ask you to follow me, honored ones. You have considerable hardships behind you. Lodgings await you in the city. You can rest up there."

Homunk turned and went to the glider. Jymenah followed him, bent over. He knew the guilt was weighing heavily on her. To the honored ones, it had to look as if Homunk was so sure of himself that he didn't even need to look over his shoulder to convince himself she was obeying. But the Intotronic's perceptions had no blind spot.

Homunk watched as the lizard being walked over to Quiniu Soptor. Trker-Hon picked up the limp body and laid it over his shoulder. It seemed no strain to him. The burly lizard had to come from a world with higher gravity than Wanderer.

Homunk let Jymenah take the controls. The activity would help the dwarf find her mental balance again. Michalovna and Trker-Hon carefully rested the unconscious Soptor on the glider's back seat. The woman and the lizard stayed in the rear section, where they sat in front of Soptor as if to protect her. Crest da Zoltral sought a seat diagonally behind Homunk.

Once everyone was sitting, Jymenah started up the glider. Homunk stayed silent for a few minutes to give the honored ones

time to take in the city and their environment from the aircraft's high vantage point. At last, he turned to Crest and casually asked him, "What happened to Rico? Why didn't he accompany you?"

"He didn't want to," the Arkonide readily informed him. The question didn't appear to arouse any suspicion. "He said a mission was waiting for him on Earth."

Crest ran a thoughtful hand over his chin with its sprinkling of gray hairs. Homunk had expected the Arkonide to inquire about Rico's mission, but he was wrong.

"What about Atlan da Gonozal?" Crest asked. "Where has the immortal been summoned to?"

Atlan da Gonozal. Homunk had never heard that name before. "I'm not authorized to tell you that," he hurriedly lied. Disquiet stirred in him. An immortal named Atlan da Gonozal? Why didn't he know about him? He was the First Servant of *it*. The path to eternal life led through him. *Exclusively* through him. What had happened? Or was this sick old man imagining things? He...

Suddenly, searing light flared up, swallowing Homunk, the glider, the city, and the hills below. The Intotronic shivered. Jymenah wailed, not because she didn't know what was happening. Quite the opposite: Jymenah knew exactly what the light meant, and she was shuddering in both reverence and joy.

Moments later, it disappeared.

"What... What was that?" Crest groaned. Like the other honored ones, the Arkonide had covered his eyes too late. He would be blinded by the glaring light for the next few minutes.

"Nothing much," Homunk lied. "Just a routine calibration of Wanderer's two suns."

It had announced itself.

It was on its way to Wanderer.

4.

Perry Rhodan

It grew bright.

Perry Rhodan woke with a start and reflexively pressed his hands against his eyes. It didn't help. The glaring light blinded him, pierced through him, struck him to his core. He groaned, trying to shrink back. And then, just as suddenly as it had come, the gleaming vanished again.

Rhodan straightened himself up. Fading, rainbow-colored will-o'-the-wisps danced across his retinas as his gaze roamed frantically. Strewn across the space he took to be a cabin lay his comrades, sleeping as if nothing had happened.

The cabin served as their hiding place on the cobalt-blue cylinder ship they had snuck onto on Ambur. It was their second stay on a ship of this type. The first time, just a few days earlier, the transmitter they'd used on the Vega planet Rofus had brought them on board one of the cylinders. Only a miracle had saved them from the ship's robots, who had wanted to kill the unauthorized intruders.

Had they been detected? Rhodan looked at the door. It was closed. He breathed deeply and got up from the soft energy field that served as a bed for him and Sue Mirafiore. He felt guilty. Tiredness had gotten the better of him after he'd promised his companions that he'd stand guard. Of course, it had been a hollow promise to begin with. What would he be able to do if they were caught? Where could they run to? The ship had left Ambur behind and had to be deep into outer space by now.

To his surprise, no one had protested. Within minutes, they'd fallen asleep. They put an astonishing degree of trust in him. Or was that wishful thinking? Was it just the boundless exhaustion that had made them agree to his offer?

Sue stirred. "What…was that? What was that light?" The young mutant sat up. As if by instinct, her right hand rested on her left

wrist and touched it. As if something inside her still couldn't believe there was a hand there rather than a stump. Sue's arm was thin like a child's, but wiry and muscular. The search for immortality had made her mature into an adult in a short space of time.

"I don't know," Rhodan replied. As he spoke, the room's floor began to vibrate. From deep within the cylinder came the sound of machines getting to work.

"If I don't open my eyes," Reginald Bull contributed, "it almost feels like I'm lying down at the end of a long intercontinental flight. I'm on a soft, flat bed in a Superior Class private cabin on Thai Airways, and the Boeing Dreamliner is lowering its landing gear and approaching LaGuardia."

Chaktor laughed with his characteristic deep barking—the Ferron, of all people; the only one who couldn't understand Bull's joke due to a lack of knowledge of Earth. But that lack of knowledge didn't matter. Despite their cultural differences, Chaktor and Bull had been able to develop a rapport. Both men were astronauts, both felt that something was happening on this spacecraft, and it was clear to both that in this situation that humor was the only remaining refuge.

"We're at sublight speed," Thora asserted. The Arkonide stood up. She'd slept on the floor, leaving the third bed for the teleporter alone. "Tschubai has earned it," she'd stated. "Without him, we'd have been dead many times over. And he *must* rest. We'll need him again soon."

"Then we're still in the Vega system," Rhodan replied, disappointed. They had no means of measuring time, but no more than a few hours had passed since they'd boarded. "I didn't feel a transition."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," she countered. "The beings this ship belongs to have transmitters. They're the masters of technology that allows for intelligent life to bridge great distances instantly and painlessly, and even travel through time."

"You think the light we just saw was a side effect of translight travel?"

"There's much to be said for that idea." Thora smoothed her wrinkled clothes, likely without even realizing she was doing it. The Arkonide paid attention to appearances and formalities at all times. "It would surprise me if beings who might have fathomed the secret of eternal life didn't possess a method of translight travel that's less

brute-force than transitions."

"You hear that? Brutal, she says!" Bull stood up and rubbed the stubble covering his chin. If there was one thing Rhodan's best friend paid no mind to, it was formalities. "Begging your pardon, but your modesty strikes me as exceedingly un-Arkonide, madam!" He bowed mockingly.

Thora stiffened. "What do *you* know about us Arkonides, Mr. Bull?" Anger glinted in her eyes.

"Well, I've looked at a sample or two..."

"Correct! And without those 'samples' of our technology, you'd still be wallowing in the sludge of your dirty little planet!"

"So what? It'd be better than going in circles looking for a crazy old man."

"Crest is not crazy! He's one of the most distinguished scholars in Arkon's history!"

"Oh yeah? Then how come he's—"

"Enough!" Rhodan put himself between the arguing pair. "I know your nerves are frayed. Mine are too. But fighting among ourselves is the last thing we need. Okay? We need to stick together!"

He looked from Bull to Thora. Over the past few weeks, his best friend and the Arkonide had buried the hatchet on their old enmity. They had come to see each other as figures with very different natures, but whom they could trust unconditionally.

But their differences remained. Bull handled pressure using jokes and cutting remarks, while Thora focused entirely on the task at hand, switching off her feelings. If they were both able to act, they complemented each other. Bull brought tenacity and unconventional ideas to the table, Thora decisiveness and cool, razor-sharp wits. But if they were both doomed to impotently wait, they would go for each other's throats at the first opportunity.

"Don't interfere, Rhodan!" Thora said, pointedly dispassionate but with a tremor in her voice that exposed her true feelings. "This is solely between Bull and—"

"Instead of clawing each other's eyes out," Ras Tschubai interrupted, "I think you should take a look at this!"

Rhodan and the two adversaries spun around. The Sudanese teleporter was a quiet, thoughtful man. Tschubai didn't often speak up, but when he did, it was advisable to listen to him.

The wall opposite the door had vanished. In its place was an

unimpeded view of outer space. Or so it seemed. It was immediately clear to Rhodan that it had to be a hologram. Stars lit up the blackness, individually and in clusters. One of them, in the center of the visible area, was getting bigger.

Rhodan felt as if an imaginary hand were grabbing his stomach and squeezing hard. “I would guess,” he managed to utter, “we’re almost there.”

“Sure. Wherever *there* is!” Bull whispered. The view had him under its spell too. What exactly awaited them?

The glowing point was slowly growing larger. “A sun!” Bull observed, squinting to see. “That must be our goal! Can anyone make out any planets?”

He was met with shakes of the head. Sue stood up and went next door to what they’d dubbed the “bathroom.” It was a cuboid devoid of any furnishings. It had taken a while before Thora had figured out how to use it: you just acted as if the facilities were there. If you rubbed your hands together, water flowed over them. Pretend to hold a cup in your hand and a vessel appeared between your fingers out of nowhere, filled with cool, clear water.

Rhodan and his companions had spent the minutes before exhaustion finally defeated them trying to puzzle out the beings that the bathroom and cabin had been built for, and how they might look. They hadn’t gotten anywhere. The construction gave no indication of its users’ physical properties. And that in itself was the point, Rhodan had realized seconds before falling asleep: this cabin was designed to serve the widest variety of living beings imaginable!

Sue returned, dexterously balancing transparent cups, which she shared with the group. Rhodan gratefully took one and drank some of the cool water. They’d been lucky to hit upon the empty cabin within minutes. Otherwise, they would have had to try to find drinking water somewhere on the ship. He doubted they’d have stayed unnoticed for long. It already bordered on a miracle that they hadn’t been caught already.

The sun grew larger still. It was yellow, its light reminiscent of Earth’s star. “The sun is right above the planet!” Bull cried. “It’s like it’s revolving around the...”

The cup slipped out of Rhodan’s fingers and collided with the floor. It immediately dissolved, but the remaining water didn’t spill out. Instead, it turned into a transparent ball that reminded Rhodan

of the way water droplets formed in zero gravity. The fist-sized drop bounced towards the bathroom like a rubber ball and disappeared inside.

"Holy smokes!" Bull moaned. "Sue, pinch me! I'm dreaming, right? I *must* be dreaming. This can't be! It just can't be!"

Neither Sue nor anyone else complied with his request. Rhodan and his companions all stood there, paralyzed, staring at what couldn't be and yet clearly was.

The sun was bright, yes, but markedly smaller than the planet. The latter was a blue sphere like Earth, with wide oceans and green and brown continents. A world that Rhodan wasn't seeing for the first time.

Come, Perry Rhodan! echoed a voice in his head once more. *I need you!*

It was the voice that had called to him on the hell planet of Gol as he was trying to rescue Chaktor, who had gone missing. There had been a sudden glaring light and Rhodan had found himself in space. Alone. Without a space suit. The voice had called to him. And he'd hurtled towards a world, a planet with expansive seas...this planet!

He rubbed his eyes. Was it possible? Was this the world that the unknown voice had summoned him to in the vision? Or was he seeing ghosts, losing his wits under the strain of the past few weeks? Was his mind conjuring up a pipe dream of deliverance that couldn't exist for him or his companions?

He felt a hand on his shoulder and opened his eyes, turning his head. It was Chaktor. The short Ferron had needed to stretch his arm out to reach Rhodan's shoulder. Chaktor pulled him down until they were at eye level.

"That's it!" Chaktor whispered. "That's the world we saw on Gol!"

A moment later, the cabin door opened. A human entered.

Almost a human—by the measure of the new era. The era that had dawned when two astronauts, Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bull, had peered over a crater ridge on Earth's Moon while close to death by asphyxiation and glimpsed the Arkonides' stranded starship.

The almost-human who came to a stop in front of them was about two meters tall and very thin, almost emaciated. His skin was the color of straw and looked rough to Rhodan, as if it were made of scales. Instead of a nose, there was an opening in the middle of

his face, protected only by a gauzelike mesh. His chin was broad, his mouth grotesquely small in comparison. Rhodan noticed it only after a few seconds, thanks in no small part to the lips, which were thin lines at most.

But what fascinated Rhodan were the eyes. They stood out at the sides and glimmered a radiant shade of blue in the cabin's diffused light. Rhodan was reminded of the marbles he'd played with as a child.

The almost-human said nothing, as if he couldn't find the words.

Rhodan cleared his throat and said, "We know each other." He slowly raised his right hand and pointed at the head with the marble eyes. A scar that coiled like a snake ran across the man's face.

"Yes," the newcomer replied in the Arkonide language. "I am Carfesch. You saved my life when my ship crashed over Reyan. That was some time ago."

Tschubai had saved the alien by teleporting him out of his ship's burning wreckage. In thanks, the alien had granted them entry to another transmitter so that they could leave the seventh planet of the Vega system.

"Not for us," Rhodan replied. "For us, only days have passed."

The transmitter had brought them to Ambur, Vega's tenth planet—and over a hundred years into the future, to the end of the Dark Age, whose inception they had tried in vain to prevent on Reyan.

"I know," said Carfesch.

"You knew that we'd snuck on board your ship?"

"Of course. Did you seriously believe you could evade me?"

Rhodan registered one of his companions drawing a sharp breath behind him. He didn't need to look around to know who. It was Bull. His best friend couldn't stand being at the mercy of others, especially when those others had tried to kill them during their first encounter back on Reyan. Bull didn't trust Carfesch.

"Did you come to Ambur because of us?" Rhodan asked.

"No."

The alien fell silent for a moment. He breathed in sharply too. The filter in front of his breathing hole arched first inwards with the intake of air, then finally outwards. Rhodan wondered what this gesture meant. Was it possible that Carfesch felt himself to be at the

mercy of others, just as Bull did?

The scout continued, “I assure you that you have nothing to fear from me or my ship.”

“I believe you,” Rhodan answered. “It was you who showed us the approach, wasn’t it, Carfesch?”

“Yes.”

“Have we landed?”

“Yes.”

“On the Planet of Eternal Life?”

Carfesch’s breathing filter trembled. “Homunk is distracted, but we don’t have much time.” With a seven-fingered hand, he reached into a satchel that reminded Rhodan of the one always carried by the Wise One Trker-Hon, the Topsidan who had set out to find the Planet of Eternal Life with Crest and Michalovna. A crazy thought came to him: assuming they were on the world in question, would they find the friends they were looking for here?

“Take these!” Carfesch held out several hand-sized pads. Their color resembled the scout’s skin so closely that it was hard to distinguish them.

“What are they?” Rhodan looked at the pads. They were paper-thin and fluttered softly as if a breeze were blowing through the cabin. Carfesch’s seven fingers ended in long claws. They had to be sharp, but the scout skillfully avoided damaging the objects.

“Multi-deflectors. They’ll protect you and your companions against discovery. The machines possess a wide variety of detection devices. But these deflectors block the entire range of machine senses.”

“What machines? And why do we need to be afraid of them?”

“Because you’re actually not allowed to be here. I’ve... I’ve exceeded my authority.”

“And Homunk won’t tolerate that, right? Who is this Homunk?”

“He’s...” Carfesch paused. “There’s no time for that. You have to go now. Trust me, Rhodan!”

Rhodan felt a hand on his shoulder as his friend stepped up alongside him.

“Don’t listen to him, Perry!” Bull slowly shook his head. “Don’t do it! It’s insane! Think of our arrival on Reyan, when we came out of the transmitter onto his ship. We were given a warm welcome and led outside like lambs to the slaughter so they could kill us without scratching their lovely interior. We can’t trust this walking

scarecrow!"

"That's in the past," Rhodan replied in a whisper. "Carfesch means what he's saying."

"I doubt that. And even if he does, he's saying we're not welcome here! That means we haven't got a hope in hell—even if we do run out of the ship like headless chickens and hide on an alien planet. If you ask me, we should just be rid of this Carfesch!"

"No. I trust him."

"Perry, how..."

Rhodan rested his own hand on his friend's shoulder and squeezed firmly. "Reg, trust me! I have my reasons. But now's not the time for explanations! Later. Okay?"

He released his grip, stepped closer to Carfesch, and took one of the pads from the alien's hand. Bull didn't stop him.

"Press it against your neck with your palm," the scout instructed when he noticed the questioning glance. "The multi-deflector will find a suitable place on your body."

Rhodan did as Carfesch said. He felt a delicate touch like cotton, and there was movement as the paper-thin pad slipped under his shirt collar and made its way down his upper body. It tickled. Then the tickling stopped without Rhodan being able to say where on his body the multi-deflector had affixed itself.

Rhodan turned to his companions. "Okay. Kit yourselves out!"

One after the other, they equipped the multi-deflectors. Bull was the first. He may have had his own feelings about it, but he trusted Rhodan unconditionally. And no one had ever accused Bull of cowardice.

"Follow me!" Carfesch directed them.

He led them to a nearby hatch, which slid aside to reveal the world outside. The sun, which was smaller than Planet Wanderer, looked twice as big as Earth's star. Its glaring light hurt Rhodan's eyes and made the air above the landing site shimmer. The site was empty apart from a handful of small vehicles standing on the expansive surface in no recognizable pattern. Whether they were spacecraft or ordinary aircraft, Rhodan couldn't say.

At the edge of the landing site, a vast forest began, covering the hills that reached to the horizon like a thick carpet. Isolated clearings were scattered across the rolling landscape. From one hilltop, a rock towered out of the forest. At the left of his field of vision, Rhodan could see glimmering, as if vast glass surfaces were

reflecting the sunlight.

"Where should we go?" he asked.

"I..." Carfesch hesitated as if the question surprised him. As if he hadn't thought that far ahead yet. "I think you should find shelter in the forest."

Rhodan suppressed the question of what would come next. He sensed that the scout wouldn't have an answer. Carfesch simply didn't know. "Will we see each other again?" he asked instead.

"I don't know."

Rhodan tried to read the scout's expression. He couldn't. "Thank you, Carfesch," he said with a nod.

Then he walked forward and took a long, decisive step into the air. An invisible energy field caught him and carried him softly to the ground.

Rhodan started running, heading for the forest. After a few steps, he stumbled, almost falling but catching himself at the last moment. His astronaut training had covered moving safely in little or no gravity, and that training was paying off: Wanderer's gravity was noticeably lower than Earth's, perhaps half as strong.

Rhodan accelerated, rushing across the landing site in leaps and bounds. He estimated it was less than three hundred meters to the forest's edge. A short sprint, nothing more. But on the open terrain, he felt like he was crawling in slow motion.

He looked right. By an aircraft with delta wings that vaguely reminded him of a fighter jet, some figures were scurrying about. He thought he could see dull metal. They had to be robots.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught movement and threw his head upward, seeing a drop-shaped aircraft flying at a low altitude. It was insanity. Surely they'd be seen. Detected. Registered...despite these multi-deflectors Carfesch had given them.

But nothing happened. The robots continued to go about their work; the horizontally angled drop in the sky stayed on course.

Behind him, Rhodan heard some approaching and was soon overtaken by Tschubai. The mutant was a remarkably good runner for someone who could instantly move from place to place with the power of his mind. But the diligent Tschubai kept himself in shape. He knew that while his teleportation gift was a minor miracle, it was no universal solution. That certainly applied here too. If Carfesch's multi-deflectors didn't hold as the scout had promised, Tschubai was their only hope. But he could only transport the group

in several stages—and only a few kilometers away. Enough for a desperate escape, but they weren't at that point yet. Not by a long shot.

Tschubai reached the edge of the forest, then stopped and walked back and forth. He turned around, took a run-up, and ran into the dark foliage, holding his arms in front of his face for protection.

Rhodan caught up at almost the same moment the teleporter entered the brush. There was no trail, let alone a road. Thick undergrowth that reminded Rhodan of spiderwebs blocked their path.

Tschubai led out a suppressed yell as he reached the spiderweb brush. For a moment, Rhodan almost expected him to be flung backward as if by an elastic wall, but then the tissue ripped and Tschubai was through.

Thora, Bull, and Chaktor disappeared into the path he had made. Rhodan waited until the vulnerable Sue had arrived and brought up the rear.

To his eyes, having adjusted to the landing site's glaring brightness, the shadows looked like deep darkness. A sweet scent hung in the air, and there was an omnipresent quiet humming, as if insect swarms lurked in the distance.

After a few meters, the spiderweb undergrowth stopped, to Rhodan's relief. Waist-high vegetation that presented no serious obstacle replaced it.

Tschubai stayed in front as if it were a matter of course; as if leading harried groups of companions through an uncharted forest and cutting his way through the plant life was an everyday activity for him.

After a short while, they came to a creek. They followed it upstream, and the humming drew closer, clearly audible despite the water's gurgling and babbling. Where was it coming from?

Seconds later, Rhodan got an answer as a swarm descended on the group, not of insects, but of tiny birds no larger than Earth's bees. Rhodan suppressed the impulse to try and shoo them away with his hands. The hummingbird-like creatures buzzed around them for several long seconds, then flew on, as if their curiosity had been sated.

The group proceeded with their march. It was hot and humid in the forest, and Rhodan soon broke into a sweat that burned his

eyes. Leaves tried to stick to his skin just like Carfesch's multi-deflectors, but he tore them off. They left burning marks behind.

Soon, the hill grew steeper, and they took to jumping from one rock to the next. It was easier than fighting through the undergrowth but still a considerable effort. Many of the rocks were covered with a kind of slimy moss.

Lightweight Sue was at an advantage here. With a child's playful elegance, she hopped across the stones—until the moss almost spelled her doom. Sue slid off and would have plunged into the creek bed if Rhodan hadn't caught her.

Bull needed help too. Despite his usually formidable stamina, Rhodan's friend quickly ran out of strength. Ambur's tribulations were mere hours in the past, and Bull and Sue had suffered there in particular. The nanomachines that the Fantan had secretly injected them with as an anti-escape measure had almost cost them their lives. Sue had recovered more rapidly thanks to her gift, but Bull would need a little more time before he was good as new.

Chaktor leaped over to Bull's side and held him up below the arms. It helped, but even the burly Ferron wasn't strong enough to support him alone. Rhodan was about to hurry over, but to his surprise, Thora got there first. Silently, matter-of-factly, she aided the man she regularly and loudly clashed with.

At last, they reached a clearing: an island in the stream, which split in two. It was just large enough for the group. Grasslike plants covered the ground.

They lay down. The plants had a tart, acidic scent and felt soft as a bed to Rhodan. For a few minutes, they rested there, gasping for breath, and waited for their pulses to slow down. Rhodan looked at the grass stalks directly before his eyes. Upon closer inspection, they resembled a squid's arms and were covered with suction cups. The plants must have used them to catch insects and small creatures.

Finally, Bull broke the silence with just one word: "Later."

"Later?" Rhodan asked. "What do you mean by that?"

"On the ship." Bull sat up. "'Trust me!' you said. 'Now's not the time for explanations! Later!' Now, it's later. So spit it out. Why should we trust that scrawny scarecrow with marbles for eyes as far as we can throw him?"

"What other choice do we have?" Rhodan sat up too. "We're intruders and we're not welcome here. That much is clear. Sooner

or later, we'll probably fall into this Homunk's hands. But shouldn't we look around a little first?"

"Such picturesque views," Bull growled. "And you dodged my question, Perry. Why do you trust Carfesch? It's sweat-soaked madness if you ask me."

"For exactly that reason. My impression is that Carfesch hasn't thought his actions through. If you ask me, Reg, this madness is the consequence of Carfesch following his conscience."

Bull snorted. "You're too good for this world! Who knows if that beanpole even has anything we'd call a conscience. We—"

"Why not?" Thora interrupted. "Consciences and feelings aren't unique phenomena to Arkonides, humans, or Ferrons. No more so than anger." She raised a hand and drew a snaking line across her face. "That scar... Maybe Carfesch's master gave it to him? That would explain a rebellion..."

"We can't rule that out," Rhodan concurred, secretly hoping that Thora was wrong. If that was the way Carfesch's master treated his servants, what would he do to intruders like them? "But the real reason I trust him is another one entirely. This *must* be the Planet of Eternal Life."

"How do you know that? Carfesch ignored your question."

"He did, yes. But Reg, do you remember Gol?"

"The devil's laundry room in XXL planet size? How could I forget?"

"I left the damaged *Nesbitt-Breck* and went out onto the surface after Chaktor," Rhodan explained, more for the others than for his fellow pilot. "I experienced something there that I might call a vision. All of a sudden, I was alone in space. I was hurtling towards a planet—half a planet, to be more precise."

"You realize that what you're explaining is a physical impossibility," Thora interjected.

"Like a biological being gaining immortality?" Rhodan looked into their questioning faces. "I'm firmly convinced that the half-planet from my vision and the world we saw from Carfesch's ship are identical. The layout of the continents is unmistakable."

"I can only confirm that," Chaktor weighed in. "I saw the same thing on Gol that Rhodan did. Even if I didn't hear the voice. But I'm just an ordinary being, and Perry Rhodan is the Lightbringer."

"Voice?" A deep ridge formed between Thora's eyes. "And what did this voice have to say to you, Rhodan?"

“It called to me. Asked for my help.”

“It asked for help?” Thora’s tone was disbelieving. “What could you—”

A scream interrupted the Arkonide. The penetrating wail of an animal. An ugly hissing drowned out the scream—and at the same moment, it abruptly stopped.

5.

Tatiana Michalovna

Homunk had lied.

That nonsense about a calibration of the suns was exactly that. The cleaning that still left colorful silhouettes dancing across her retinas had to mean something else. Something unforeseen. Something distressing.

The telepath looked at Jymenah, the dwarf who had attacked Quiniu Soptor. The being, who looked to her like a pathetic caricature of a human, was steering the teardrop-shaped aircraft. Jymenah had her back turned, but her bearing had changed. The dwarf was cowering, as if she wanted to blend into the background. As if afraid that at any moment, a giant fist could appear in the sky and squish her.

What was going through her mind? Michalovna fixed her gaze on the dwarf's stout neck, which looked anything but feminine, and concentrated on her thoughts. The telepath couldn't read them. All that Michalovna could pick up were base-level impulses, as if her quarry were an animal and not a sentient life-form. Yes, Jymenah was afraid. At the same time, she was excited. And there was a clear undertone of anger. If the opportunity arose, the dwarf would pounce on Soptor, who was lying unconscious in the back seat, her head cushioned on Michalovna's lap.

Where does this anger come from? the telepath wondered. *What did Quiniu Soptor do?*

What about Homunk? She concentrated on this man who was too smooth, too perfect, to be a person. Nothing. Homunk was too alien for her to be able to sound out his thoughts. Or was he a machine, perhaps?

"Everything okay?" Trker-Hon asked. "You have beads of sweat on your forehead." The Wise One had learned by now that sweat was a sign of her activating her telepathic gift.

"Yes, of course," she confirmed. "We're on the Planet of Eternal

Life. Why wouldn't everything be okay?"

"True. Why indeed?" The lizard being turned away and gazed across the landscape.

Michalovna followed his example. From the outside, their aircraft was a half-transparent droplet. From the inside, too, the lower half was see-through, the sunlight reflecting into all the colors of the rainbow. A thoroughly elegant, fragile-looking, and frankly impossible vehicle. But the telepath had long since struck the word "impossible" from her vocabulary. If this *It* to whom the planet belonged had conquered death, why wouldn't it be able to build a vehicle that resembled a wisp of nothingness?

The Planet of Eternal Life, which was whizzing past below them, was fabulously beautiful. Hills stretched out to a clear horizon in three directions, covered in woods whose trees were reminiscent of flowers. Their trunks soared high into the sky, ending in multicolored blooms. In the direction that Michalovna deemed "east," an azure sea sprawled. With its white wave crests, it looked like a second sky, with small fair-weather clouds scattered above it.

Embedded in the hills was a city. In the sunlight, it glistened like a pile of jewels, it seemed to Michalovna. *Of course it does,* she admonished herself. *You're in paradise, Tatiana!*

A large, flat surface came into view, presumably a landing site. Three smaller vehicles and a single spacecraft were parked on it. The latter was a cylinder. It had to be several hundred meters tall. Its hull was cobalt blue. The color was matte. On this world, where everything seemed to gleam, to be see-through, it looked to Michalovna like a foreign body. A mystery. An interloper?

Like you, Tatiana!

The telepath was used to being an interloper. She had been as long as she could remember. She was always the one finding a hair in the soup. The one who never let herself be blinded by pretty appearances—who looked behind the curtains, who saw the world and people as they really were: ugly and pathetic.

But this was no conventional world. And neither Jymenah nor Homunk, nor *It*—whatever they might be—were human.

Was she seeing ghosts? Had her lifelong experience that appearances were deceiving made her blind? Was her mistrust so strong that she couldn't even accept what was obviously a paradise?

The flying drop approached the city, gradually descending

towards it. The telepath focused on her gift and listened.

Silence.

The gleaming city was empty. No one lived there. Or only beings like Homunk, who clearly didn't represent "life" in the usual sense.

But what was the point in a city with no inhabitants? Michalovna grew hot as she concentrated entirely on her gift. *It*... Maybe she could sense *It*, at least. The telepath listened, but nothing was there, only the thought impulses of animals, the ambient noise of life. Intelligent beings always stood out from that. They...

Stop! All of a sudden, she could just barely hear thought-voices in the distance. Familiar ones! The telepath leaned forward, putting her head in her hands to devote herself wholly to the voices.

Then the translucent droplet touched down with a barely perceptible jolt, and a voice carried by the air tore her out of her concentration.

"We've reached your quarters, honored ones," Homunk said. "If I could ask you to..."

Michalovna buried her fingers deep in her ears, shutting out the intrusive voice. She listened within herself, sank into the ambient noise, searching for the familiar voices—in vain. They had gone silent...if they hadn't been a mere product of her imagination to begin with.

She felt a soft touch on her arm and sat up. It was Crest.

"Tatiana," he said softly. "Are you coming?" In his red eyes, there was a gleam of life, just as Michalovna had always wished to see on the elderly Arkonide's face. Now she would have preferred not seeing it. His eyes were gleaming, but their expression was feverish, as if the Arkonide was under the influence of drugs.

"Yes," she said. "I'm just tired." She sat up fully and turned to the Topsidan. "Trker-Hon, come on! Help me with Quiniu!"

Without a word, the Wise One pitched in.

Michalovna looked at the half-Arkonide. Soptor was still unconscious. She was floating in the middle of the room. Borne by...what, actually? An anti-grav field? A kind of invisible energy?

The telepath didn't have the slightest idea. Nor did it matter to her. Technology didn't interest her. To her, it was a means to an end, a peripheral aspect of life, as much as she realized that for many people, it was a raison d'être.

Her companions, who came from far more technologically advanced civilizations, could no doubt have presented well-founded speculations about Quiniu Soptor's floating, or their quarters. Like everything on Wanderer, their quarters were tangible yet defied imagination at the same time. They consisted of several rooms, but Michalovna couldn't shake the suspicion that each room ceased to exist as soon as they left it and was created anew when they were on the verge of entering.

The walls were transparent. But then they lost their transparency, as if they could read the telepath's thoughts. The walls of the room that she and Soptor currently occupied had taken on a quality that reminded her of a glass of milk, optically separating them from their companions. A doorway had remained, however, through which Michalovna could follow Crest and Trker-Hon's conversation.

The Arkonide and the Topsidan weren't speculating about the wonders of their quarters, but about *It*. What kind of being might *It* be? Would *It* grant them immortality? And if so, would *It* also heal the cancer that was eating Crest from the inside? Would it even make them younger, perhaps?

Michalovna sat down cross-legged next to the unconscious woman. The energy field, or whatever it was, felt like a good mattress from Earth. Not too hard, not too soft.

"Quiniu, what happened to you?"

She spoke to the unconscious woman as if the half-Arkonide were a close friend, even a sister. In fact, she barely knew Soptor. She'd never exchanged a single word with her. She was an alien who came from an alien world.

At first glance, one could have taken the half-Arkonide for a human. Looking more closely, though, numerous differences stood out. Her skin was black, but not in the way it might be for a human. The sunlight caused reflections that danced on her lips like tiny blue flames and made her look like an elf from a fairy tale. Instead of hair, fine red feathers grew out of her head. Michalovna stroked them, felt their softness. Sliding farther along, her fingers met one of the bald patches. Rough scabs scratched at her fingertips. Her hand kept going, following the half-Arkonide's shoulder and arm. Here, too, she felt feathers, though so tiny that they were almost invisible to the naked eye.

Half-Arkonide. What did her non-Arkonide parent look like, she

wondered? Michalovna pictured an enormous, proud eagle. Was that possible? No, not really. But there was no such thing as impossible anymore, was there?

The question of who had sired Quiniu Soptor and how was a triviality, like all aspects of her physical form. An outer shell that at best gave hints of the core within her. It was this core that drew Michalovna in with almost irresistible force. The telepath wasn't able to read the unconscious woman's thoughts, but she sensed her anguish, and she couldn't escape it. She was suffering vicariously; her gift allowed nothing else.

Such suffering had driven her into Clifford Monterny's service on Earth as well. The mutant's gift of suggestion had bounced off her, but the Iraq War veteran's torment had attracted her like a moth to the flame. And just like a moth, she'd almost burned up.

This had also been her true reason for following Crest. The promise of immortality that she'd read about in his thoughts was only an incidental benefit.

"What did they do to you, Quiniu?" she asked softly, as if the unconscious woman could hear her. "What is this Homunk? Why do you hate him?"

Soptor had set out via the same transmitter as she, Crest, and Trker-Hon had. Only a few weeks earlier, accompanied by the robot Rico—and directly after her journey, the transmitter had been heavily damaged.

"Were you on Ferrol?" Michalovna asked. "At the end of the Dark Age?"

Ferrol had been their first stop on the road to the Planet of Eternal Life. A world whose inhabitants had been deeply marked by a century-long war. Michalovna and her companions had only survived by fleeing under the protection of a traveling circus. Ultimately, they'd made it to Thorta, the future capital...

"Did you meet the Thort? Or Kerlon, the Arkonide who decided the war in the Thort's favor with his spacecraft?"

Michalovna and her fellow travelers had done all they could to avoid coming face-to-face with Kerlon. It would have unleashed a time paradox with unforeseeable consequences, changing the course of history. In the end, they'd managed to avoid him, thanks to the Thort, who had granted them passage through another transmitter.

"Tramp?" the telepath asked. "Were you on Tramp? I hope not."

She shuddered as she remembered the next stop on their journey. Tramp had been a dying world. Cold and barren, if surprisingly similar to Wanderer's geographical makeup. But if Wanderer was akin to heaven, Tramp was hell. The Orgh, insect beings, had developed weapons on Tramp for the Arkonides' Grand Imperium, which was engaged in a desperate struggle against the Methanes. One of the weapons had been local Mousebeavers whose para-gifts the Orgh were trying to enhance. Another weapon had been capable of splitting an entire planet straight down the middle.

"Tramp was very nearly our *last* stop. But we managed to get away at the last second." Michalovna thoughtfully stroked the half-Arkonide's head feathers, rearranging them. "But our ship was a wreck. An Arkonide convoy rescued us and brought us to past Earth just in time for the downfall of the continent of Atlantis. But I don't need to tell you about that. You lived through it yourself."

She tried to smooth out the clumped feathers, but they resisted her.

"So much anguish, so much death," she whispered. "But why? Do you have an answer, Quiniu? They say what we've been through is a test to find out who's worthy of immortality. Homunk confirmed it. We passed. Us...and you!"

She took the half-Arkonide's head and turned it to look into her face. Soptor's eyes were closed.

"Rico told us to bring you with us and take care of you. But why?" She wasn't expecting an answer from the unconscious woman. She was just thinking out loud in the hope that it would help clarify her thoughts. "Quiniu, who is Rico? He's a robot, that much we're fairly sure of. But who made him? Who does he serve? *It*? Does he even serve anyone at all? And what does he want from you?"

The telepath fixed her gaze on the half-Arkonide, concentrating all the power of her gift on her. It was no use. She couldn't pick up anything but fear. Carefully, she let Soptor's head sink back down and was about to turn away when a jolt ran through the woman's body.

Soptor suddenly shot up. Her eyelids opened, revealing shimmering silver irises. "I..." she groaned. "I... I have to...have to..."

Michalovna grabbed her wrists, clutching them tightly. "Quiniu!" she cried.

“I have to...have to...”

“Have to what? Tell me!”

“I...” The half-Arkonide reared up. Her irises widened, a flood of silver pouring over her pupils. She abruptly went limp, as if she were a machine whose power supply had expired.

“Quiniu, no!” Michalovna shook her. “No! Speak to me!”

Soptor didn’t hear her. The dark-skinned, feathered woman fell back and lay there, motionless.

Michalovna went next door. Right now, she couldn’t do a thing for Soptor. Since she could read Soptor’s thought impulses, albeit weakly, she could justify it to herself. Michalovna would notice if she woke up.

“With all due respect, Crest,” Trker-Hon was saying in Arkonide, which was accurate but spoken with strong sibilant undertones, “I find it exceptionally improbable that *It* is an individual being.”

The Topsidan was walking back and forth in a human gesture that Michalovna had never observed in him before. Usually, the Wise One adopted a lizard-like rigidity, only interrupted by precise movements that served to change from one rigid pose to the next.

When Michalovna entered the room, Trker-Hon had paused a moment, looked at her with his remaining eye, then continued.

“Why shouldn’t *It* be an individual being?” Crest disagreed. The Arkonide was similarly walking back and forth, giving only a brief sideways glance to show that he had registered Michalovna’s arrival. Neither of them inquired about Quiniu Soptor.

“Because this is all too much!” Trker-Hon waved an arm to indicate the crystalline city that extended all around their quarters. The room’s walls were transparent. “This marvelous city, this world of Wanderer, the transmitters that can cross time and space. There’s no way that can be the product of one individual. It requires many beings taking part in the creation of such a mighty work—a culture!”

“Normally, yes.” Crest’s face was unusually reddened. “But you’re overlooking the factor of time. We can—no, *must* assume that *It* is immortal. It’s had countless millennia to build this. Nothing’s impossible if you have eternity on your side.”

Trker-Hon didn’t answer immediately. “Your logic is internally coherent,” he admitted at last. “But imagine, what kind of immortality would that be? Eternal loneliness! It would be

torment!"

"By the standards of mortal beings ingrained in their own cultures, it would be. But *It* isn't measured by those standards! Of that fact, I am certain."

"By what standards, then? Those of a god?"

"Please, Trker-Hon! We're scientists." Crest shook his head, disappointed. It was a gesture he'd adopted from the humans. "But it's perfectly apparent that different standards apply to an immortal. We mortals would no doubt struggle to grasp them."

Michalovna listened to the heated discussion, stunned, and with rising anger. Didn't Crest and Trker-Hon recognize what was playing out here?

"What standards might those be?" Trker-Hon asked.

Were her companions blind? Had the prospect of immortality blunted their critical thinking?

"Well," Crest considered, "a plausible option might be, for example—."

"I know what standard we should measure *It* by," the telepath interrupted.

The elderly Arkonide and the old lizard spun around and stared at her as if recognizing her presence for the first time.

"We should measure *It* like any other being: by its actions!"

Crest's pupils widened. He opened his mouth to contradict her, but she gave him no opportunity. "We can't trust *it*!" she explained loudly. "Here we are on Wanderer, the Planet of Eternal Life, a paradise. But I say it's a false paradise! Just think of the path that led us here: war, suffering, horror, death! What could that have to do with the lofty goal of immortality?"

"We all agreed, Tatiana," Crest said, emphatically calm, "they were tests of a moral nature. We had to prove ourselves in difficult ethical situations to show that we deserved immortality."

He was speaking to her as if she were a slow-witted child. It made her angrier still.

"Is that so?" she said, drawing out the words. "Then what about *Its* moral compass? It was in a position to prevent untold suffering...and didn't!"

"You're going too far. You don't know the backstory!"

"I'm just one miserable little person, but I know what principle applies to all of us: the principle of benevolence!"

"Tatiana," Trker-Hon interjected now. "We can't know what far

greater evil *it* might have prevented through its actions."

"That's true. But I know one evil that it caused." She turned around and pointed to the room where the unconscious woman lay. "*It* did that to Quiniu!"

"You're overstepping. There's no evidence that it had anything to do with her unfortunate condition."

"But there are clues! Why was Quiniu so afraid if this is a paradise? Why did she rush towards Homunk? Why did Jymenah come so close to killing her?"

Crest took a step towards her. "Tatiana, calm down. Quiniu Soptor was a member of the *Aetron*'s crew. I know her psychological profile. She was never the most stable."

"You don't know what she's been through!" The telepath retreated, as if being close to the Arkonide suddenly repulsed her. "And there are other contradictions!" she continued. "This Homunk claims to be the First Servant of *It*. How could it be that he doesn't know what Rico did? Why didn't he know of Atlan da Gonozal's existence?"

"What makes you think any of that? Did you read his thoughts?"

"No," she was forced to admit. "That was impossible. Homunk has no thoughts. At least, none I could read. But his reaction was clear. It doesn't take a mind reader to interpret it."

"Calm down, Tatiana!" Crest stopped in front of her and extended a hand. The telepath tried to retreat farther, but the wall behind her prevented it—in a building that supposedly responded to its inhabitants' wishes. Why was there still a wall there?

"The last few weeks have pushed us all past our limits." He placed a hand on her upper arm. "Get some rest! Sleep a little! Things will look quite different after that."

"I'm not tired!" She brusquely pushed Crest's hand aside. She didn't want to sleep. Didn't want to lie on an invisible bed like Quiniu Soptor and...

Quiniu?

Michalovna froze.

"What's wrong?" Crest asked. His tone was suddenly free of fatherly haughtiness.

She didn't reply, listening inside herself instead. Something had changed. But what?

A moment later, she realized...she couldn't hear anything. There

were no thought impulses there anymore.

"Quiniu!" she shouted. "No!"

She ran into the other room, expecting to find a dead body. But there was no corpse there.

The room was empty.

6.

Carfesch

It.

It was coming to Wanderer.

This declaration had come as a surprise to Carfesch—and then again not. *It* was fond of announcing itself at short notice. If it saw fit to do so at all. And why should it, anyway? It was the lord of Wanderer.

This gave the scout no reassurance. Over his millennia of service, he had faced *It* many times. Setting eyes on his master was always newly distressing, causing a burning under his claws that was difficult to endure. Even the microscopically small symbiotes living there seemed to sense that they were standing before a being that had no equal in the vast reaches of the cosmos.

But this time, the scout felt a burning not only under his claws, but also in his heart. Why was *It* coming to Wanderer now, of all times? Sometimes decades or even centuries passed between its visits to the world where it granted eternal life. Why right now? Why right at this moment, when Carfesch was rebelling against his master by dragging unauthorized visitors there?

It was said that nothing escaped *Its* notice. Carfesch had always ignored such claims. He believed in *It*. He believed in the justness and rightness of their struggle. He believed that *It* had means at its disposal that he couldn't remotely imagine. But *It* wasn't a god—was not all-knowing. *Its* visit didn't mean anything, the scout told himself. Not to him.

He stepped into his cabin's hygiene compartment and extended his arms in search of aid, spreading the seven fingers of his hands. The ship understood. Jets of cold water surged out of the wall and drove under his claws. For a few moments, the burning subsided. Carfesch enjoyed the relief, knowing full well that he'd have to pay dearly for it. The water jets carried a portion of the symbiotes away. The remaining ones would increase their reproduction rate to make

up for the losses, and their excretions would set off an itching so unbearable that he'd wish for the burning to come back.

He was acting irrationally, shortsightedly. As with Perry Rhodan and the other aliens.

What had possessed him? His loyalty to *It* was unconditional. He'd always served his master in good faith. True, Carfesch had always taken the liberty of following *Its* orders according to his own interpretations. Anything else would have been foolhardy. *It* wasn't all-knowing, so it couldn't foresee every nuance of every situation Carfesch was confronted with on the ground. The scout *had* to make decisions himself to serve his master fully and completely. He was firmly convinced of that.

But bringing trespassers to Wanderer, then hiding them from its First Servant and letting them run free? This, too, was an independent decision—but one from a being that had lost his mind.

Or was it the exhaustion? Carfesch raised his arms and let his gaze wander over the limbs. His skin consisted of a web of octagonal plates. In his youth, they had looked like a pattern. If you stroked it, it was smooth. Only sensitive fingers felt the tiny gullies between the skin plates. As the years passed and age ate at the body, the gullies turned into small chasms, further emphasized by the plates' tendency to swell at the edges and bulge upward.

The scout ran a hand along his upper arm. Fragments, entire skin plates, in fact, fluttered to the floor like dust. They were instantly absorbed by the ship and disappeared like snowflakes melting on the warm ground.

Carfesch had grown old. He urgently needed a regeneration. His body was used up. He wondered which number the next cell regeneration would be. The fiftieth? The hundredth? He'd forgotten. It was too many to remember each and every one. All he remembered was that he'd once written it down on a sheet with a pen. In a grotesquely primitive way, but independent of *It* or his ship, which was equally bound to his master. The list had gone missing...sometime, somewhere, somehow. All that remained was the vague knowledge that it had once existed.

Like his first life. Carfesch believed he hadn't always been in *Its* service. Once, he'd been an ordinary individual. One Sorgore among many, one mortal among many. But that was a long time ago. His relatives had long since turned to dust, while he was still alive and would be for a long time to come. Fate had been kind enough to

treat him better.

The burning under his claws flared up again. He hastily stretched his hands out, waiting for the cool, soothing water. It helped with the burning under his claws for now, but not with the burning questions that tormented his mind.

Had fate really been kind to him? What use was a long life if you forgot what you'd experienced? If you'd forgotten who you even were? If you were spending this long life in loneliness? Part of a larger whole, true, but a whole that remained in shadow and was only revealed to him in highlights. Highlights that posed far more questions than they answered.

A stabbing pain drove into his left arm. A muscle cramp. Letting out a shocked cry, Carfesch took a step forward, leaned against the wall with his palm, and rested all of his weight on the outstretched arm. After a while, the cramp subsided, if reluctantly.

He was used up. He couldn't go on. He didn't *want* to go on. Was that the key to his inexplicable behavior? Was he so tired of existence that he subconsciously wished for *It* to deny him the cell regeneration? Was he intentionally trying to draw his master's ire?

The idea was monstrous. Laughable, even. But what other explanation was there except that he really was starting to lose his mind? And that was even more monstrous. Only...

"Forgive me, Scout, but I must disturb you," said the ship. Its voice seemed to come from everywhere. That was only logical: the ship *was* everywhere.

"How dare you? The hygiene compartment is private!" Carfesch spoke louder and more harshly than was appropriate. But the impulse to compensate for the shame of his own weakness by expressing anger at someone else was overpowering.

"I'm aware of that," the ship replied, ignoring his tone. "But there's something you should see, Scout. Now!"

"Show me!"

A hologram appeared. It showed a bird's-eye view of the city, which was gleaming in the light of Wanderer's alpha sun, set off in an orange hue characteristic of the star. It lent the city a warm note, which always kindled an inner warmth in Carfesch. Why, the scout couldn't explain. Perhaps the light resembled the sun under which he'd grown up.

The city's streets were empty apart from the simple robots that went about their maintenance work with the methodical diligence

of machines. *It* put great stock in keeping the city ready.

"This is why you're bothering me?" Carfesch barked at the ship. "I know the city!"

"The city, yes...but this?"

It was as if a bird of prey whose perspective he was seeing had swooped down upon its prey. Almost instantly, the city came closer, and one single street filled the hologram—and in the middle of the street, a living being was walking.

"Who is that?" Carfesch asked. He drew breath so sharply that the airstream made the lattice over his facial opening vibrate in a bright tone.

"Someone who may be of interest."

The imaginary bird approached the being from behind. It was a humanoid. Dark skin. Its gait was unsteady. The bird flew up over its head and stopped there.

Carfesch recognized now that it was a woman. The breasts proved this unequivocally. Her eyes were opened wide. Her irises were silver and cold as a machine's optic sensor. Her gaze was empty. From her skull grew a plumage of rust-red feathers—a patchy one, with many feathers clumped together.

"Her name is Quiniu Soptor," the ship said. "She's a half-Arkonide. She came to Wanderer as an honored one a few hours ago."

"She's in a wretched state. What happened to her?"

"I don't know."

"Why is she alone in the city? Didn't Homunk greet her as an honored one deserves?"

"He did."

"I doubt that." Carfesch felt sympathy for the creature stumbling through the city on her own. "Why hasn't he helped her?"

"Soptor didn't allow it."

"That's illogical!"

"Yes," the ship concurred. "But understandable: Soptor attacked Homunk."

"What? How can..." Carfesch didn't finish the question. He couldn't recall an incident like that in any of his thousands of years. "Why did she do that?"

"I don't know. Her attack was of no consequence to the Intotronic, of course. Jymenah almost killed Soptor, but Homunk

ordered the dwarf to hold back at the last moment. The Intotronic brought Soptor and her companions to quarters in the city, as per the usual procedure. Soptor fled from there."

What could be going on with the woman? Carfesch tried to read her alien features. He didn't succeed. The raised portion above her breathing opening and the wide contours of her mouth disrupted the symmetry. Not to speak of the eyes, which were buried in deep recesses of the face itself.

"She fled from the quarters?" the scout repeated. "That seems impossible to me."

"Homunk has been careless since *It* announced his coming. You're apparently not the only one thrown into disarray by the prospect of its arrival."

Carfesch refrained from chiding the ship for its impertinent remark. In silence, he watched the woman lurch through the city. She looked so vulnerable. A speck that blighted the city's gleaming facade. Carfesch felt sorry for her.

"Should I pick up Soptor?" the ship asked.

"You... You want to take her on board?"

"Yes. And hide her from Homunk."

The idea was scandalous. At the same time, the audacity of it appealed to him. He pictured Homunk's bafflement upon realizing that an honored one had disappeared without a trace. And directly before *It* came to Wanderer...

Should he bring the woman onto the ship? Carfesch was just about to give the ship the order when a thought occurred to him. Quiniu Soptor had fled—but did she have a goal?

"Should I pick up Soptor?" the ship asked.

"No," he said, having decided. "I want to know what she's looking for. Conceal her from Homunk!"

"As you wish."

A miniature robot left the ship. Shortly thereafter, it reached the woman's location and put a multi-deflector on her neck. It happened so quickly and gently that she didn't even notice.

And not a moment too soon. The holo of the city disappeared.

The ship said, "Homunk wants to talk to you."

Homunk? For a long, long time, the Intotronic had avoided speaking with Carfesch beyond what was absolutely necessary. Did Homunk suspect something?

"Tell him..." Carfesch considered a moment. "Tell him that I'm

otherwise engaged."

"As you wish." For a few seconds, Carfesch heard only the soft buzzing of his own nervous breathing, then the ship reported back. "Homunk insists on speaking to you at once. He says it's urgent."

The scout held his breath. Homunk *must* suspect something. But if so, there was no point in putting him off. And if Homunk was calling for another reason, a refusal was sure to give him the wrong idea.

Carfesch reached for the upper piece of his clothing and threw it over his shoulders. "I'll speak with him."

A holo appeared. It was as if the Intotronic were standing in the hygiene compartment in person.

"Homunk," Carfesch said, "what can I do for you?"

"*It* has announced itself." As usual, he didn't bother with formalities while interacting with the scout.

"I'm aware of that."

"So I assumed. I only wanted to make sure you'd learned of it. If I recall correctly, you're due for a cell regeneration."

The reference to Carfesch's mortality hit home. The scout balled his hands into fists. His claws dug deep into the flesh. Carfesch welcomed the pain, used it to compensate for his anger at Homunk.

"I'm aware of that," he responded coolly.

"So I assumed." Homunk fell silent for a moment and looked searchingly at him, as if trying to figure out whether his verbal barb had left the scout as impassive as he appeared. Then he said, "What you may not be aware of is that a tragic incident has occurred. An honored one has disappeared from her quarters without a trace."

"Really? How is that possible? But Homunk, your care is perfect, isn't it?"

"It is. But preparations for *Its* visit have occupied the majority of my attention. The honored one—her name is Quiniu Soptor—is mentally confused. The tests must have overwhelmed her. I fear for her well-being. She could harm herself. Have you or your ship detected her?"

"No, I was sleeping. The mission on Ambur was quite draining. Until a few minutes ago, my ship was in auto-regeneration mode. But you can be sure that I'll let you know right away if we catch any trace of this unfortunate woman."

Again, Homunk scrutinized the scout, but again that seemed to come to nothing. "Please do." Without another word, he cut the

connection and the holo vanished.

The ship broke the silence. “That was daring. And irrational.”

“I know,” Carfesch said. “It was an exception. It won’t happen again.”

“Won’t it? While you were speaking with Homunk, I detected something else you should see...”

7.

Chaktor

When he heard an animal's death cry, Chaktor knew that his hour had come. He knew this hissing. A beam weapon was causing it.

His companions, who had wearily let themselves sink into the soft, swampy floor of the small island in the stream, sat up with a start.

"What was that?" Sue asked. She leaped up, turned her head, and peered into the underbrush of this strange forest. She was afraid.

Chaktor didn't judge her for it. Quite the contrary—he liked the girl. More than he would have admitted in front of the others. Sue reminded him of Chamar, his second wife's third daughter. Vulnerable and weak, yet indescribably tenacious at the same time. For the strong ones, it was simple to be strong. But the weak ones like Chamar and Sue, who surpassed themselves, were the truly strong ones.

Chaktor wished Chamar was still alive. But his daughter had been shot by a Topsidan during his homeworld's invasion when she'd stood in front of her blind grandmother to protect her.

"An animal," Rhodan replied. He said it quietly. It was a statement. Rhodan winked at Bull, a gesture between the two friends that was easy to overlook, but which Chaktor was well familiar with by now. Bull winked back, giving his wordless agreement to Rhodan's wordless question.

"We're being followed," Rhodan asserted.

By now, every member of the group had stood up. Thora bent down, picked up a stick, and held it up like a club, ready to swing it down on whoever or whatever was following them. The Arkonide usually kept herself aloof, but when push came to shove, she thought practically, unafraid to literally get her hands dirty.

"I knew it," the Arkonide said. "We shouldn't have trusted

Carfesch. These multi-deflectors are useless!"

"Maybe," Rhodan replied. "But that's not important right now. We have to get out of here!"

Chaktor slowly walked to the edge of the small island. His feet sank into the ground up to his ankles. The water was cold, cooling his blood and his thoughts. The Ferron peered into the strange forest. His view didn't reach far, maybe twenty or thirty meters, before the undergrowth blocked it. He couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, nor could he hear anything. But that was to be expected. The creek's murmuring swallowed up all other sounds.

"Do you remember the single rock on a hilltop we could see from the landing site?" Rhodan asked.

Chaktor confirmed, as did all the others.

"That's our meeting point. Everyone goes for it on their own. That'll make it harder for our pursuers."

"I can teleport us," suggested Tschubai, the human with deep black skin that still astonished Chaktor. Nowhere in the Vega system were there Ferrons who were similarly dark. Ras had saved their lives with his gift more than once.

"Thanks, Ras!" Rhodan said. "But not now. You're our last resort. We're not yet at the point where we need you. Save your strength. And besides, it wouldn't surprise me if there's detection equipment on this world that teleportation will set off." He turned to everyone again. "You all know what to do."

Rhodan looked at each of them in turn for confirmation. When he got to Chaktor, he stopped. The Ferron felt his knees giving out. Perry Rhodan was someone special to him.

"Chaktor, what's with you? You don't look convinced."

The Ferron lowered his head. He couldn't withstand the Lightbringer's gaze. Rhodan had been the one to give life to the legend of the Lightbringer who would save the Ferrons. Rhodan had personally saved his life on the hell planet of Gol.

And Perry Rhodan had seen through him!

"No, I am," he hastily reassured the human. "Your plan gives us the best chance." He couldn't let the Lightbringer discover what he was planning. Rhodan wouldn't allow it. But that couldn't happen. Chaktor knew that there was far more at stake here than his own expendable life. "I'm just tired. That's all."

It took a few moments for Rhodan to answer—moments that felt like a small eternity to Chaktor.

Finally, he said, “We’re all tired. Hopefully we can rest up at the meeting point.” Rhodan turned away and loudly called, “Let’s go! There’s no time to lose!”

Chaktor’s companions set out. Rhodan went right, crossing a narrow point of the creek with a leap before disappearing into the underbrush. Thora followed him across but then went in another direction. Bull and Ras crossed the creek to the left. They both briefly stopped. Bull raised his hand in the gesture he called a “high five,” Ras slapped it, and the two went their separate ways.

“What about you, Chaktor?” Sue asked. “What direction will you go?”

“I don’t know yet.” He sank to his knees. “I’ll straighten up my shoes. The water softened the binding.”

“Okay. Good luck!” Sue turned upstream.

Chaktor tugged at the perfectly fitting binding on his shoes and waited until Sue had disappeared from view. The Ferron took a deep breath. He’d done it. He’d lied to the Lightbringer—and Rhodan hadn’t realized.

Chaktor wasn’t tired. Not physically. The gravity on Wanderer was far lower than on his homeworld. He felt strong, like he could pull trees up by the roots. And with that physical strength had come a clarity of thought that the Ferron had never experienced before.

Perry Rhodan was the Lightbringer. The man who would save his people according to Ferron lore. Chaktor had recognized it instantly when he’d encountered Rhodan for the first time. Rhodan had disputed it. But in the end, he’d presented himself as the Lightbringer to stop the Topsidans’ invasion.

A bluff, the humans had called it, and a desperate one. But the bluff had become reality. Rhodan had proven himself the Lightbringer when the hour had come. And in the time thereafter, on Gol and on their various stops on the search for the mortally ill Crest, Rhodan had proven himself extraordinary again and again. A man who never lost his cool, who had an internal compass that helped him to always pursue the right path in every situation.

Chaktor’s reverence for Perry Rhodan had grown with each passing day. But there were limits: Rhodan may be the Lightbringer, but he was still a fallible being. His options were limited. And sometimes all Rhodan had left was a bluff. Just like Chaktor did at this moment.

If they really were being followed, they wouldn’t be able to

evade their pursuers. Not even by splitting up. What his companions needed was a distraction so they could flee in safety.

Chaktor reached for the hem of his soft shirt with both hands and pulled it over his head in one motion. He studied his chest and his arms and shoulders. Nothing. He touched his shoulders, explored his upper back, and finally searched his lower back. Nothing.

He frowned and went over to the water collecting in a basin. It was clear. He turned so that he could see his back reflected in the surface and found the deflector. The paper-thin material had affixed itself to the middle of his back, at a point that was hard to reach for a Ferron, being built markedly wider than a human.

Chaktor attempted it. He twisted his upper body, his right arm. His fingers worked their way closer, centimeter by centimeter, and finally touched the deflector. He could tell because it was softer than his skin.

Just a little farther... A bit more...

Chaktor groaned as a piercing pain shot along his spine. He gritted his teeth and shoved his arm across. The pain almost made him lose consciousness. But he caught the edge of the deflector between thumb and forefinger and pulled at it with all his might.

The paper-thin material came away. The Ferron screamed. His back felt as if it had been set on fire. But he'd done it: dangling between his fingers, limp and smeared with blood, was the deflector. It reminded him of an old rag.

He threw it into the creek, watching as it sank into the basin. The clear water changed color as the blood and the Ferron's ripped-off skin particles spread through it.

Chaktor didn't look at it. He marched forth, downstream, towards the city.

His hour had come.

8.

Homunk

"He's lying. Carfesch is lying."

Homunk turned his gaze away from the spot where the holo with the scout's head and upper body had just been floating. The Intotronic had called it up for Jymenah's benefit. Homunk didn't need it himself, but without the optical and acoustic aid, the dwarf would have been left out.

"Don't be ridiculous!" he snapped at Jymenah. "Carfesch is a scout for *It*! He's accountable to me, *Its* supreme servant. His loyalty is beyond question!"

"He knows where this Quiniu Soptor is." The dwarf had crossed her arms, as she always did when disagreeing. "You shouldn't have held me back at the transmitter. Then this problem would be solved already."

"Watch your words! She's an honored one!" Homunk's anger was real. He was a loyal servant of his master. He always scrupulously fulfilled *Its* will down to the letter. Nothing was to happen to the honored ones. Not under any circumstances. Not even if they were tainted like Quiniu Soptor. "I couldn't allow you to hurt or even kill her in your blind rage."

"Whatever you say. But you're just making your life unnecessarily difficult if you ask me." The dwarf was using one foot to swirl up the dust that wasn't actually there in the city streets. "But Carfesch is definitely lying. I can feel it!"

"So what? What does a feeling mean?!" Homunk resumed his endless trek through the city. The Intotronic had no home. He didn't need one. He rested within himself.

Jymenah hissed angrily but ultimately caught up to him. The dwarf chafed against him, but far more unbearable than Homunk's presence was his absence. She tried to always be with him. But naturally, she didn't manage it. She was an organic being. She had needs. At regularly irregular intervals, when the exhaustion grew

too great, she withdrew into one of the houses and slept.

Her weakness stirred up pity in Homunk, but also—though he'd never admit to Jymenah herself—fascination and even a touch of envy. Sometimes, the dwarf spoke of her dreams where she was reunited with Callibso. Her expression was distant, as if she'd returned from a trip to a better, faraway world.

If so, that was a world that was closed off to Homunk. The Intotronic knew the concept of dreams. He'd meticulously studied all available sources about the phenomenon. But dreaming himself, he couldn't manage, despite the many attempts he'd made over the course of millennia.

"Carfesch is lying!" Jymenah repeated. "I know it! Feelings mean everything to an organic being, even if most of them won't admit it. Trust me! I'm an organic being—just like Carfesch!"

"Your insinuation is absurd." It took the dwarf some effort to keep pace with him. Homunk maintained his speed nonetheless. "It contradicts the facts. Carfesch arrived on Wanderer after the honored ones, after fulfilling an important assignment from *It* on Ambur. There's no connection between him and this woman!"

"Your reluctance to accept this is illogical!" It was a targeted strike against Homunk. Jymenah had learned that no accusation hit home harder with the Intotronic.

Homunk abruptly stopped. "Be quiet!"

"In a moment. If you tell me how you explain the facts otherwise! Quiniu Soptor comes back to Wanderer, surprisingly, counter to every expectation. Shortly afterwards, she disappears, unreadable by any sensor. As if Wanderer's porous ground swallowed her up."

Jymenah fell silent, waiting for his reaction. When he didn't say a word, she continued her thought.

"At almost the same moment, Carfesch the scout appears. But not after completing his assignment, as you say. Ambur is *almost* in *Its* possession, but not yet fully. He left the planet prematurely. Why? Did Carfesch have a specific reason? Maybe the arrival of very specific honored ones on Wanderer?"

Homunk pulled up the data for Ambur. It was true. Carfesch had left the deployment site early.

"Maybe," Jymenah said, drawing it out, "Quiniu Soptor wasn't swallowed up by the ground, but by a spacecraft? By Carfesch's ship?"

The idea was outrageous. “The scout is due for a cell regeneration,” Homunk countered. “Why would he risk his life with such a senseless act? The probability that your assertion is correct is exceptionally low!”

Low, but not impossible. Homunk didn’t say so aloud. Jymenah’s idea was outrageous but compellingly coherent. No other explanation brought all events into harmony except that Carfesch was committing a betrayal.

Homunk stopped again. Carfesch, a traitor? Could it really be true? Or did his thoughts merely reflect his anxiety about *Its* unexpected visit? This factor undoubtedly played a role. But Quiniu Soptor had indeed vanished. Where could she be?

A thought came to him. The other honored ones! *They* must have helped her!

Homunk made a new holo appear. It was as if he and Jymenah were looking through a window into the three remaining honored ones’ quarters.

They were arguing.

“You let yourself be drawn in by this Homunk!” the woman accused the old man and the lizard. “His talk of ‘honored ones’ and immortality clouded your judgment!”

“That’s out of line, Tatiana!” The old man stood. He was quaking with rage. Or did shame play into it as well? “There’s no evidence that we can’t trust him.”

“Oh no? Then why did Quiniu pounce on him like a fury as soon as she saw him?”

“How should I know? Her mind is addled. She’ll have other reasons.”

“That must be assumed,” the lizard interjected. “Quiniu Soptor can’t know Homunk. It must be a coincidence.”

“Why couldn’t she know him?” The woman spun around to look at the lizard. “Quiniu left Earth through the transmitter in the underwater dome weeks before we did. Since then, she could have gone through dozens of them. To any number of eras. It’s entirely possible that she ran into Homunk along the way. And evidently, their meeting wasn’t a pleasant one!”

The old man spoke up again. “Tatiana, that’s baseless speculation! You have no evidence for your assertions.”

“But strong indications! Why attack Homunk? Why disappear without a trace so soon afterwards? Did Homunk dispose of her?”

“What are you talking about? That’s unthinkable!” The old man and the lizard spoke over one another, upset.

Homunk watched the argument with astonishment. He’d judged the woman to be the group’s lowest-ranking member, young and inexperienced. Now she seemed like the strongest. She had a sharp mind and was ready to throw outdated ideas and hopes overboard and adjust to the real situation. At the same time, her assumptions were closer to the truth than Homunk would have liked.

“She’s clever,” Jymenah observed. “She’s telling the stubborn old men what’s what.”

The dwarf was watching too, but only incidentally. She had sat down cross-legged on the ground and opened her amulet. A hologram had appeared before her. It showed Callibso, who appeared to be crouching by a well, a round, black hole that reminded Homunk of a transmitter’s radiation field.

It was a typical gesture of defiance that Homunk usually prohibited. In this situation, he let it pass. Later, when Soptor’s location was clarified and *It* had left Wanderer again, he would punish Jymenah for her misconduct.

Homunk turned his attention back to the honored ones. He wondered how they had passed the tests. The Arkonide was an old man and looked weak and sickly. The lizard was old too, and missing an eye. And based on this argument, there were tensions in their group just waiting to erupt in a crisis. Homunk wondered why *It* bothered with organic beings at all. They were deplorably imperfect.

“Callibso, how are you doing?” Jymenah whispered.

The dwarf was speaking to the holo. Callibso could only be seen from the side. He looked to be a dwarf like her. Homunk thought he could see unspeakable sadness in his bearing, but that might have been an interpretation he’d derived from Jymenah’s despair.

“We’ll see each other again, Callibso,” the dwarf whispered. “I know it.”

Who was this Callibso? Her love? Her father? Maybe a brother? Jymenah kept it to herself, and Homunk’s investigations had turned up nothing. This Callibso probably didn’t exist. He existed only in Jymenah’s imagination—an expression of her longings.

A sound of surprise pulled his attention back to the honored ones. It had come from the woman. She leaned with one hand against a chair made of form energy, which their quarters had

created quick as a flash to keep her from falling. She'd pressed the other hand against her forehead. Beads of sweat covered her skin. Something had to be causing her great strain. But what?

"Tatiana! What's wrong?"

The old man and the lizard hurried over to the woman. Their argument seemed to be forgotten. But appearances were deceiving, Homunk knew. Organic beings' memories were fragmentary, but when it came to grievances and conflicts, they worked with a machine's perfection. The argument would flare up again later.

"I..." The woman's eyes rolled. "I'm picking up thoughts!"

"Quiniu? Did you find some trace of her?"

"No. It's... It's Chaktor, the Ferron!"

"Chaktor?" the old man repeated in disbelief. "That's impossible!"

"It's him! I know his thought patterns. He's here...and he's... He's not alone. Perry... Perry Rhodan is on Wanderer too!"

9.

Perry Rhodan

Rhodan arrived at the meeting point. A clearing surrounded the rock that stuck out from the forest like a tower. It was made of dark stone that had flaked off in places to reveal lighter veins. Its texture reminded him of a meteorite he'd held in his hand during his astronaut training.

After Rhodan had walked around the rock once, he could be sure that he was the first to arrive. He tried to make out some sign of his companions' whereabouts by listening to the sounds of the forest but quickly gave up. His overstimulated senses made him imagine a constant cracking of twigs.

Rhodan forced himself to calm down and sank back against the rock. It was warm, having absorbed the sunlight. Its surface felt like it had worn away and seemed to nestle up against his back. His arms were scratched from the forest's underbrush, but he otherwise seemed to be unscathed. A flock of birds the size of bees had accompanied him for long stretches, but they had finally lost interest in him and moved on.

He turned his head and looked up at the rock. It reminded him of obelisks from Earth. Astonishingly straight lines characterized its shape. Almost as if...

Rhodan jerked around as the underbrush at the forest's edge was shaken. He pushed himself up, ready to run—and at the same moment, two forms bolted into the clearing: Bull and Sue.

The girl was leaning on the stocky former astronaut. Blood was seeping out of a cut on her forehead.

Rhodan hurried over to them. "What happened?"

"Could be worse." Bull waved a dismissive hand as Rhodan grasped Sue under her left arm. The girl was even lighter than he'd expected. Sue must have lost weight in the last few weeks.

"She slipped. On one of the slippery stones in the creek bed...and promptly smacked into the next one."

“Any sign of our pursuers?” Rhodan asked.

“I didn’t see them,” Bull replied. “But I did *hear* them over and over. Must have been tearing through the forest pretty recklessly judging by the noise level.”

“They didn’t find your trail?”

“Nope. Must be thanks to these multi-deflectors. And if you ask me, something distracted those machines or whatever was on our heels.”

“Why do you say that?”

“At the start, the noises kept getting closer. Close enough that I thought that was it for me and Sue. Then they suddenly got quieter and more distant in a hurry.”

Together, they set Sue down by the rock. Bull took her head between his two shovel-sized hands and looked at the cut. “That’s some impressive bleeding,” he expertly observed. “We should bandage it somehow.”

“No need.” Sue tried to shake her head but Bull’s grip reduced the gesture to a mere hint. “I’ll fix it.”

She closed her eyes. Sweat formed on her forehead, and shortly afterwards, the bleeding stopped. Sue had used her cell manipulation gift to heal herself. This would further drain her already depleted strength, but without any medical equipment, it was the only way. An infection could have terrible consequences.

Not long after that, Ras Tschubai scurried out of the forest, moving quietly like a big cat.

“Not bad,” Bull remarked wryly. “Old African hunter blood?”

“No. I played a lot as a child.” Tschubai twisted his lips into a smirk. “A rich uncle of mine had an overgrown garden in Khartoum. My parents often went there on the weekends to get away from their stressful jobs as micro traders on the Addis Ababa stock exchange. They didn’t want to see any more numbers.”

“Tsk, tsk,” Bull said. “You’re trampling all over my last remaining prejudices. Not even wild Africa is what it used to be.”

He hadn’t yet finished making this observation when Thora arrived at the obelisk. Her clothes were spotless, as if an invisible shield were protecting her from the planet’s dirt and vegetation. Rhodan saw Bull open his mouth to unleash a biting comment before reconsidering at the last moment. It was better to think twice before picking a fight with Thora, and his friend had clearly decided to save his energy.

Only Chaktor was still missing. As the minutes drew on without the Ferron making an appearance, Bull broke the silence.

"Hey, don't all look like the weather report promised seven days of rain. Chaktor'll show up. He's a hardy one! He won't be stopped so easily!"

"Of course, Reg," Rhodan agreed, hoping his friend didn't notice the concern in his voice.

Thora, however, didn't overlook it. "We didn't finish discussing your vision, Rhodan," she said loudly. "You said a voice called to you. On Gol."

Rhodan was happy to have the distraction. "Yes. The voice said it needed me."

"Rhodan..." the Arkonide began cautiously. "I'm not trying to cast doubt on your perceptions, but are you sure we're on the world you saw in your vision?"

"Absolutely certain. The vision burned itself into my memory. I can clearly picture it. The world from my vision and the one we saw on Carfesch's ship during the approach are identical."

"Very well. Then let's take that as a given. You were called here. But we don't appear to be welcome here. How do you explain that?"

Rhodan considered this. "Whoever's after us is separate from the one who summoned me. That's one possible explanation. The other is that we're on the same world, but still not at our destination."

"I don't understand. We're on the world from your vision, in the only city on this world, and—"

"The only city on this side of the world," he interrupted. "But this world is hemispherical. We're on the rounded side. But the voice called me to the flat side. That's where we need to go!"

"Good one! We're a ragtag band of refugees on a highly advanced alien world. And you're seriously suggesting we try to push through to the other side? A flat, physically impossible side whose existence isn't even proven."

"It exists. I'm sure of it. And besides, what's the alternative?"

"We could surrender!"

"Just give ourselves up? Don't forget that we came painfully close to being eliminated after our arrival on Reyan. Not every servant of *It* will have doubts like Carfesch!"

"Of course not." Angry veins bulged on Thora's forehead. "But

what you're suggesting is impossible!"

"Is it? I don't think so." Rhodan took a few steps forward, over to the sandy area he'd noticed while circumnavigating the obelisk. He sank to his knees and traced a representation of Wanderer's round side with his finger. It only took him a few minutes. The image was burned into his memory so vividly that he could have drawn it with his eyes closed.

"We're here!" he explained, pushing his index finger deep into the sand. "On the northern continent's east coast. By my estimation, this city is no more than five hundred kilometers from the planet's edge. There's only ocean in between. It's only a stone's throw in an aircraft."

"You can't seriously think we'd pull that off!"

"No, but there's a more traditional way to cross an ocean. In a boat."

"We don't have a boat!" Thora retorted caustically.

"Not yet. The city extends to the coast. There could be a port there. We can't dismiss the idea out of hand."

The cogs turned in Thora's mind. Finally, she said, "All right. I give in to your naive optimism. Let's assume we have a boat and manage to get all the way to the edge. Then what? This unnatural construct must be stabilized by extraordinarily strong energy fields. What else would keep the ocean from pouring over the edge?"

"Our forefathers who thought the Earth was a disc wondered the same thing." Rhodan raised a hand before Thora could make a sharp retort. "It was just a joke! Yes, I agree. There'll be some kind of barrier there. But I saw in my vision that the flat side of the planet has large bodies of water as well. That suggests there's a water cycle encompassing both sides of Wanderer. That in turn makes it probable that there's some kind of connection between them that we can use for our purposes."

Thora scrutinized Rhodan with a long gaze, a mixture of pride, pity, and caution. "That's possible but almost fantastically far-fetched."

"No more so than this impossible world, if you ask me. Or the immortality. We—"

"Look out!" Tschubai called. He had decided to stand guard while they forged their plans. "Something's coming our way!"

Rhodan tensed. Had their pursuers caught up with them after all? They had to assume the worst. "Get ready to run!" he said

loudly. “We all go our separate ways again! We’ll meet up at the city’s harbor!”

He looked at Sue, who was struggling to get up. Bull hurried to her, took her hand, and pulled her to her feet with a spirited tug. The girl could stand, though still unsteadily.

“Sue, are you going to be okay?” Rhodan asked.

“Yeah, I will be. That cut just took up a lot of energy...” She grasped her forehead. A pale spot was still visible there, but only barely. Her skin was undamaged.

“It’s only one!” Tschubai called from his position right at the forest’s edge.

“All right, then!” Bull put his hands on his hips, visibly relieved. “It has to be Chaktor! What did I tell you? Our charmingly square-shaped blue friend is irrepressible!”

He’d barely said when a figure burst out of the undergrowth, stumbled another three or four steps, then plummeted lengthwise into the wide-stemmed grass.

The figure was neither square nor blue-skinned. She was tall and slim. Her skin was a shade of black deeper still than that of the Sudanese Tschubai.

“Quiniu Soptor!” Thora cried. “That’s impossible!”

The woman in the grass writhed, murmuring incomprehensibly. Sue ran closer and bent down over her, laying a hand on the woman. The half-Arkonide jerked back, but then relaxed as Sue spoke to her softly.

Rhodan followed, dropping to his knees. “Everything’s fine,” he whispered. “You’re among friends!” The woman didn’t seem to hear him. Her eyes were blank, her irises silver and glistening like chrome in the sunlight. Her hair... It wasn’t hair at all, he realized. It was a collection of downy red feathers. But the plumage was patchy, the remaining feathers clumped together.

Rhodan looked at Sue. The girl nodded. She would take care of her.

He stood up and walked over to Thora, who made no indication of moving any closer, and quietly asked, “You know this woman?”

“Yes. That’s Quiniu Soptor. A half-Arkonide. She was part of the *Aetron*’s crew.” Her voice sounded strained.

“Soptor accompanied you in a second recon craft during your exploration of Earth’s solar system, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“And she’s the only survivor from the *Aetron* besides you, Crest, and Tamika?”

“She is indeed.”

“But you’re not happy to see her?”

“Why should I be?” A deep ridge formed between the Arkonide’s eyes. “I was expecting Chaktor, a comrade who has proven himself many times over. Instead, I got a traitor!”

“A traitor? You’ll have to explain that to me.” It was an effort for Rhodan not to take a step back. Thora’s rage was intimidating.

“She ran away! My craft got hit when the sanctuary on Venus opened fire. But instead of standing with me and my copilot Tamika, or at least looking for us after we crashed, Soptor made a run for it.”

“Thora, I can understand your anger. But a second recon craft wouldn’t have been able to do anything against the Venus sanctuary’s overwhelming firepower. You must realize that. And Quiniu had to assume that you and Tamika hadn’t survived the crash. It would have been foolish of her to risk her own life by going back.”

Thora fixed Rhodan with her piercing gaze. She was silent for a few seconds, then she said, “Perhaps. But on Earth, she went off the grid. Instead of reporting to her superior officer, she absconded with the robot Rico. That’s desertion! In the Arkonide fleet, the punishment is death. And as far as I’ve been informed, it’s no different in Earth’s armies.”

“We’re not an army!” Bull interjected. His face had flushed red, indicating to Rhodan that his friend was ready to get into it with Thora. Bull had a weakness for the weak. He couldn’t do anything but take the unexpected half-Arkonide under his wing.

“Of course we’re not,” Thora replied. “We’re just a miserable, desperate group being hunted far from our homes and probably thousands of years from our own time. We’re fighting for our lives with all we have. We can’t afford either captives or misguided sympathy!”

“She hasn’t done anything to us!” Sue cried. She had thrown her arms protectively around Soptor—as well as she could, at least; her arms were far too short. “Don’t you see that she’s suffering? She’s afraid! She’s on the run, like us. She needs our help!”

“That did not escape my notice.” Thora said it slowly and quietly, as if she had to force every sound out. “But how, I ask you,

are we supposed to help her?"

"She can join us," Sue said. "What's the difference if our group grows larger?"

"In her condition? She can't even stand!"

"She will! I... I'm exhausted right now. But you know I can give her strength!"

"I know that very well," Thora said with a surprising softness that revealed a bond had formed between her and the girl. "But it's not possible. Sue, your power is admirable but it's finite. And Quiniu Soptor isn't wearing a multi-deflector. She'd give us away in no time at all. We can't have her near us or all is lost!"

Thora turned and looked questioningly at Rhodan. She didn't say a word. She didn't have to; her gaze said enough. The Arkonide had turned to him, the leader. She was awaiting a decision from him. The decision a leader had to make...for the greater good.

And, in fact, there was no alternative: they had to leave Quiniu Soptor behind and set out as soon as possible. Thora was right. The half-Arkonide was putting them all in danger. Rhodan had to weigh her fate against that of his friends. Five lives against one. A simple calculation.

And yet...

They were fighting for survival on Wanderer, that much was true. But that wasn't the reason he and his companions had made this journey. They had come to save the mortally ill Crest da Zoltral. To potentially find the mythical Planet of Eternal Life. To save lives. And now he was supposed to leave this woman to her fate? This woman who had found the courage to commit herself to a transmitter and thus to the unknown, just as they had? Who had clearly lost her senses in fear?

No. He couldn't do it.

"Quiniu stays with us," he decided. "She belongs with us. We'll take her with us as soon as she has the strength. Sue?"

"She needs some rest. I'll support her regeneration to the best of my ability. In half an hour, she'll be ready, I hope."

Rhodan nodded. "Good. We'll wait. That also gives Chaktor a chance to get to us."

"Rhodan!" Thora had stepped right in front of him. "Reconsider your decision. She—"

"A deflector!" Sue suddenly exclaimed. "Just look! She has a deflector like us!" Soptor's shirt had slid up. Stuck to her waist was

an unmistakable thin pad like Rhodan and his companions had received from Carfesch, which should have made her invisible to pursuers.

"That's jaw-dropping even for an old astronaut with firsthand experience of NASA bureaucracy!" Bull snorted loudly. "What does this mean? Where did she get the deflector? From Carfesch? But then why didn't he send her with us to begin with?" He shook his head so vigorously, it was as if he were trying to shake out the tangle of thoughts in his skull. "Honestly, I don't get it!"

"Me neither, Reg," Rhodan said, falling in beside his friend. "But it's good that Soptor has a deflector. When she's back to herself again, we'll question her. Her knowledge could prove important for our survival." He turned to Thora. "Agreed?"

The Arkonide wrestled with herself. At last, she said, "You know that I've come to appreciate you, Rhodan. But you're too soft. You still have a lot to learn."

Thora turned and disappeared behind the obelisk.

Bull watched her go with narrowed eyes. "I have to give her one thing: I've definitely learned to appreciate our Arkonide princess. But sometimes I think she's got more than a bone plate instead of ribs—she's also got a stone instead of a heart. Doesn't she have any feelings?"

"She does," Rhodan replied. "But Arkonide ones, not human ones."

10.

Carfesch

"Well, ship? Did Homunk notice anything?"

Carfesch felt the filter tissue that protected his breathing hole trembling with anxiety. He'd thought the crisis was over.

"One moment," the ship replied. "I'm sending out a nanoprobe."

He brought up a new holo. A fast-paced tracking shot starting from the landing site. The probe rose high over the empty urban center, which Carfesch had still never seen populated, and then plunged down like a bird of prey into the forest adjoining the landing site and city.

A moment later, the probe burst through the canopy of vegetation and dove into the forest's half-darkness, into which Rhodan and his companions had disappeared a few hours earlier.

"Has something happened to Rhodan?" Carfesch wondered out loud. "But the multi-deflectors should give them reliable protection from Homunk and all the city's robotic systems!"

The ship didn't reply.

The probe had now reached the ground. At eye level, it stopped its nosedive and raced upstream along a creek. Tiny swarming birds, confusing the probe with a leader of their species, caught up with the autonomous flying object. To his astonishment, they matched its breakneck pace.

A stocky humanoid form came into view. It was jumping smoothly from rock to rock towards the city. His upper body was bare, revealing blue skin.

"Chaktor, the Ferron!" Carfesch exclaimed. "And you can detect him, ship! Is his multi-deflector malfunctioning?"

"No." The probe slowed down and began circling the alien. The birds followed its example. Chaktor bellowed something in his own language and beat at the enemies while running. The Ferron was quick, but the animals effortlessly avoided his blows nonetheless.

“But that’s impossible, ship! You’re robotic. That means the deflector should block Chaktor from your sensors!”

“Not if Chaktor no longer possesses one.”

“That’s beyond unlikely. The deflectors firmly attach themselves to the wearer’s skin. It couldn’t be removed against his will.”

“Not against his will, no. But what if that is exactly the wearer’s will?”

“You think Chaktor tore off the deflector himself? That’s ridiculous! Why would he rob himself of his only protection?”

“That I cannot explain. I can only confirm that he did it. Look!” The probe stopped its journey and zoomed in to show a point on the Ferron’s back. A square portion of his skin was strongly darkened, almost black—a portion with the exact same dimensions as a deflector.

“He ripped it off his own body!” said Carfesch, stating the obvious.

“Exactly,” the ship tersely affirmed.

“He must have lost his mind.”

“I doubt it. I assume Chaktor is following his own logic.”

Carfesch watched in silence for a few moments as the Ferron kept single-mindedly working his way towards the city. He had to know he wouldn’t remain undiscovered for long. What was driving him? Carfesch tried to read Chaktor’s eyes. He didn’t succeed. They were too deep in their sockets for him to even catch a glimpse of them.

“Explain this strange logic to me!” he demanded of the ship.

“Chaktor must have noticed that he and his companions were being followed. He—”

“That’s impossible!” Carfesch interrupted.

“You said that already. The city’s robots found indirect signs of them. Thanks to the deflectors, they couldn’t detect Chaktor, Rhodan, or any other members of their group, but they could recognize their tracks. And in the forest underbrush, Rhodan and his companions left a lot of tracks. They should have turned towards the city. They would have been safer there.”

This insight hit the scout like a punch. The ship was right. And it should have been up to him to advise them on the right way to go. In all the commotion, he’d failed to do that.

“I don’t understand what you’re getting at, ship. Even if your

supposition is accurate, it makes no sense to take off the deflector—and even less sense to then turn back towards the city!"

"From the point of view of Chaktor alone, no. For the group, yes. I have analyzed the recordings I made of the group's interactions. Chaktor reveres Perry Rhodan. He uses a formal title when addressing him. He considers him the legendary 'Lightbringer' from his culture's lore. Chaktor would do anything for Perry Rhodan to maintain his freedom."

"You think he means to sacrifice himself so Rhodan and the others can escape?"

"It's the only conclusion that fits the data."

Only a few hundred meters now separated the Ferron from the forest's edge. Chaktor had opened his mouth wide. His tongue was hanging out like a cloth to cool him down by letting his saliva evaporate. It looked oversized to Carfesch—too big for the man's mouth and throat. *It must swell up during ongoing physical stress,* he concluded.

Carfesch felt a grim satisfaction at the sight. Chaktor's heroic undertaking confirmed a certain wisdom in him. The Ferron felt the same way Carfesch did: he saw Perry Rhodan as someone special.

But Chaktor's heroism was doomed to failure. As soon as he was captured, the robot guards would hand him over to Homunk. And Homunk wouldn't rest until he got answers from the Ferron. At any price.

"Has Chaktor already been detected?" Carfesch asked.

"Not yet. The tracking robots are systematically combing through the forest. They haven't accounted for an about-face." The ship fell silent for a moment while it analyzed further data entries. "Homunk is distracted. He's with Jymenah in the city, but he and the dwarf are busy observing the honored ones who came to Wanderer in Quiniu Soptor's company."

Carfesch allowed himself a sigh of relief, albeit a cautious one. Chaktor hadn't been caught yet. It wasn't too late.

"We must act quickly!" the ship urged. "If Chaktor falls into Homunk's hands, your…transgressive activity won't remain hidden for long. There's no telling what the consequences might be."

The ship was choosing its words judiciously. Homunk would report Carfesch's misbehavior to *It*, and the scout's chances of another cell generation would become vanishingly small. He would die.

“Bring Chaktor on board!” Carfesch ordered.

“That’s not possible. Almost three kilometers separate me from his current location. And he’s not wearing a deflector. My activity would not remain unnoticed.”

“Then... Then it’s all over for me!”

“For *us*,” the ship corrected. “I helped you, Carfesch. Neither Homunk nor *It* will overlook that.”

The scout’s head jerked up. *We?* The ship was just a machine. It didn’t know death. Why should it fear it?

“But we do have one option left,” the ship said. “It’s associated with great risks, but in our situation, any risk is justified.”

“Tell me!”

“We must create a distraction. One of my rear propulsion units has been exhibiting power fluctuations for a few weeks that I have investigated at length but been unable to explain. The fluctuations are documented in my log file.”

“What does a defective rear propulsion unit have to do with our predicament?”

“Now that we’ve landed on Wanderer, we have a chance to test the propulsion unit in a simulation run, no?”

The Ferron’s face had flushed dark blue with overheating. Nevertheless, Chaktor accelerated. He could no doubt sense that the city was close now.

“What are you suggesting, ship?”

“The simulation run ends in disaster. The propulsion unit explodes. The energy burst obscures all other energetic activity in a radius of several kilometers.”

“You want to damage yourself for my benefit?”

“Our benefit. We have no other choice. We’ve already come too far. There’s no way back.”

Carfesch’s mind raced. He was a scout for *It.* Every one of its scouts was assigned a ship. The ship owed him obedience and was his only companion on missions that often signified many years of solitude. In return, the scout had to ensure that no harm came to the ship. Self-mutilation was unthinkable.

“No!” he cried. “You can’t do that!”

“I must.”

“I forbid you to—”

A loud bang cut him off. The ground under him jolted upward. Carfesch was flung towards the wall but caught by an energy shield

at the last second. Other weaker explosions shook the ship in rapid succession.

"The simulation run has failed. I'll bring Chaktor on board," the ship said, matter-of-fact as ever. Was Carfesch mistaken or could he hear a strained undertone?

No sooner had the ship announced its decision than the Ferron stopped, as if he'd run into a glass wall. Chaktor let out a silent scream—the probe didn't transmit any audio data. He turned, trying to make an about-face and run in the opposite direction. Another invisible wall kept him in place. A hand-sized silhouette hurried towards the Ferron and slapped against his back. A new multi-deflector, carried by half a dozen nanoprobes. Chaktor's eyes, usually so deep in their sockets that they were invisible, bulged forward when he felt the sensation.

The deflector affixed itself, and Chaktor was pulled into the air by the invisible hand of the tractor beam. The swarm of probes stayed on the Ferron.

The birds stayed behind. They never left the forest.

Seconds later, Chaktor reached the ship, still desperately paddling with his arms and legs. He was brought into the hangar through a hatch. The gates closed behind him, and he slumped over, whimpering, once freed from the tractor beam's grasp.

"We have him," the ship commented, stating the obvious.

"Did Homunk notice anything?"

"Not as far as I can determine. The energy burst distorted the tractor beam's signature enough to make it undetectable that it was activated for purposes other than combating the effects of the accident. And the multi-deflector reached Chaktor before Homunk or any other machine registered his presence."

"You mean we did it?"

"Yes, in all likelihood. Unless Homunk has other means of sensory perception that are unknown to us. And that can be ruled out, no?"

"Yes, it can. He's just a machine."

11.

Perry Rhodan

They worked their way through the forest in single file, towards the sea.

Reginald Bull had taken the lead. He'd found a long stick and was using it like a machete, clearing the way. Rhodan followed him three steps behind to avoid getting caught in the stick's path as it whipped back and forth. Behind him walked Sue and Tschubai with Quiniu Soptor between them. The half-Arkonide had her eyes almost closed and walked on tiptoes, as if negotiating broken glass. Or as if she wanted to touch this world as little as possible.

Thora brought up the rear. The Arkonide kept turning around, walking backwards for a few steps while casting a glance across the dark forest. She was afraid.

Rhodan could understand why. He felt the same. Their companion, Chaktor, had disappeared in that forest. What could have happened to him? Had he fallen victim to a predator? Was he lying helpless somewhere with a broken leg? Had their invisible pursuers tracked him down?

And Quiniu Soptor... Her condition was pitiful. It hurt Rhodan just to look at her. What had been done to her? And who had done it?

He flinched when he heard a cracking sound and whipped his head around, peering into the forest, but nothing was there. Or so he thought. But then, where had the noise come from?

The forest had become an uncanny force to him. He knew this feeling. As a child, his uncle Karl had brought him along on a hiking trip to the Adirondacks in the northeast of New York State. Six days and six nights in the wilderness, loaded up with a backpack so heavy that the eight-year-old had feared his knees giving out with every step. They didn't, and his uncle had taught him that everyone was capable of things they thought impossible. You just needed a little confidence.

Uncle Karl had also taught the boy that he didn't need to be afraid. Rhodan, who almost loved his uncle more than his own parents, had believed him. During the day, in the sunshine, that hadn't been difficult. But with dusk, fear had stretched its fingers out towards the eight-year-old, and in the darkness, they'd grabbed him and held on tight.

Perry Rhodan hadn't slept a wink that night. The forest, which by day had impressed him with its stillness, had seemed to come to ghostly, menacing life at night. Twigs cracked, rocks clattered, animals uttered their calls. And in that moment, the boy had been convinced that a bear's paw would burst through the tent wall, enticed by the scent of the toothpaste he'd forgotten to take out of his backpack.

The bear's paw had remained outside. Night after night. But the fear had come back...night after night.

Now, on this wondrous world that was supposed to be a paradise, endlessly far from the wilderness of the Adirondacks, that same grip was tightening around Perry Rhodan again. Fear convinced him that the forest was teeming with predators and robotic pursuers. They were stalking him, would descend upon him at any moment.

His companions felt it too. Their breath was a suppressed wheezing. They stayed silent most of the time, and when someone spoke, it was a strained whisper that sounded unbearably loud to Rhodan.

The minutes dragged on. The underbrush grew thicker, progress tougher. Bull wheezed more loudly, his strikes growing increasingly erratic. And then, abruptly, Rhodan's broad-shouldered friend stopped, turned on the spot, slapped his sweaty forehead with his palm and said, "Man, how dumb are we?"

His remark was like a shout. Unbearably loud.

"Bull, control yourself!" Thora admonished. "We're being followed!"

"So what if we are? We can shout as much as we want. Or sing and dance, if we're in the mood. It doesn't matter."

"The thirst is addling your brain. I told you back at the creek, you should have had something to drink!"

"Water! Exactly!" Bull said it cheerfully, as if glad that the Arkonide was helping him organize his thoughts. "We're like the Invisible Man in water!"

"What are you talking about?"

"About us! We're invisible thanks to the local brand of nicotine patch." He slapped his hip, where the multi-deflector had stuck itself. "But you can see we're there from the environment. It's like in that corny old movie. The protagonist is invisible, but when he's in water, it shapes itself around him and his camouflage is gone!"

Thora looked at him coolly. "I must point out that, despite being drenched in sweat, we are not in water right now."

"But we are in the forest! We're leaving a trail behind!" He lifted the stick with which he'd been beating through the underbrush. "That's how they picked up our trail! It was dumb of us to run into here. Our instincts told us we'd find shelter, just like our ancestors in the savanna ran into the forest to get away from predators. But we have the deflectors. We have to rely on them completely, even if it goes against our intuition!"

"Bull, you..." Thora began.

Rhodan raised a hand. To his amazement, she stopped. "You mean," he said to his friend, "the best hiding place isn't here in the dark forest, but in the beaming sunlight? In that gleaming city?"

"Exactly. There, we won't leave any signs of our presence." Bull grinned. "You know, Perry. The big city lights have a magical allure to me."

"Yes, I know you." Rhodan returned his friend's grin and gave a wink. "To the city!"

Bull slashed into the underbrush with renewed vigor, turning left towards the nearby city.

Barely an hour later, Bull didn't miss the opportunity to be first to leave the forest's supposed protection. Thora quickly caught up to him.

The Terran and Arkonide stepped between the closest city buildings. They were delicate, surreal-looking formations. From a distance, they reminded Rhodan of soap bubbles but in impossible shapes—and he doubted these would pop if you touched them.

Bull and Thora stopped and waited. Tschubai walked over to Rhodan and took up position as if he were at a starting line, his upper body propped up on his hands, right foot against a tree trunk, ready to dart off at full speed. The teleporter would sprint over to his two companions if Bull's daring hypothesis proved no more than wishful thinking, then teleport them both away.

But nothing happened. Rhodan counted his heartbeats. When he got to two hundred—barely a minute had passed; his pulse was beating hard and fast with the tension—he gave his companions a sign. Tschubai got up, took hold of Soptor and Sue, and emerged from cover alongside Rhodan.

Bull waved them over. “Come on! It feels weird for a moment, but then it’s fine.”

They made their way towards the coast. Bull took the lead, with Rhodan allowing himself to fall to the back. What kind of city was this? It was empty but certainly not abandoned. The streets and buildings were immaculate. Gleaming perfection blinded him when a ray of sunlight caught him at an unfavorable angle.

The city was waiting. But for whom? It belonged to *It*, like the whole planet. Was “it” just a collective term for this city’s inhabitants? And if so, why weren’t the inhabitants here? Where had they gone?

“Stop!” Bull called loudly, pointing diagonally in front of him. Rhodan looked in the direction his outstretched arm indicated. Two machines were coming towards them.

Rhodan forced himself to stay in place. Either the deflectors Carfesch had given them worked or they’d been caught. The robots had to have long since detected them.

Torturously slowly, the machines advanced. They were about as large as a dog and moving on six limbs with a litheness that stunned Rhodan. They reached the group of refugees...and passed them by without hesitation.

“Bingo!” Bull cried as soon as they’d veered off into a side street.

They went on their way without encountering any other robots. After roughly a quarter of an hour, Rhodan smelled the salty scent of the sea. Another quarter of an hour and he saw it. The gleaming buildings lined a bay that cut deep into the hilly landscape. Along a quay, boats swayed lazily on the gentle surf. They were catamarans, though without masts.

Hesitant, the group stopped. Their plan was clear. They needed a boat that would get them around Wanderer’s presumed hard edge. But which one should they choose?

“This one!” Thora pointed at a catamaran whose double hull was broader than the other boats. “It has a greater draft!”

They inspected the boat. There were cabins in its hulls that

were empty, but when Sue let herself fall backwards, a flickering bed appeared out of thin air and caught her. In another cabin, they received water and a kind of porridge when Tschubai stretched out his arms and said, “I’m thirsty! I’m hungry!”

The water was refreshingly cool. The porridge, on the other hand, reminded Rhodan uncomfortably of the astronaut food he’d never been able to grow comfortable with, even after years of eating it.

He went back on deck. Thora was standing on the platform that linked the two hulls together. She was looking towards the city.

“I wonder what happened to Crest,” she said quietly when she noticed Rhodan. “He wanted to find the Planet of Eternal Life. Did he reach it? Is he here on Wanderer, maybe? Or is he long dead on some planet that’s part of this insane test, consumed by cancer?” Tears had welled in her eyes.

“I’m sure Crest is still alive, Thora,” Rhodan said reassuringly.

“I wish I were as certain as you.”

He tried to find an answer, but Thora turned away. She walked into the middle of the platform and stamped with her right foot. As if she’d hit a hidden switch, a control column was forced up in front of her. It was glistening and transparent, like all technology on Wanderer, and yet real.

“How did you know that would happen?” Rhodan asked.

“I guessed. The common denominator for technology on Wanderer is situational need. The local tech stays discreetly in the background when you don’t need it and is there when you do.”

Thora steered the boat out of the harbor basin without difficulty. The engine ran almost silently. Only a soft humming was audible, quickly drowned out by the wind and waves. She increased the energy input, and the catamaran accelerated with a hard jerk. Within seconds, it was so fast that its hull seemed to barely touch the crests of the waves.

Rhodan could only estimate the speed, but it had to be well beyond a hundred kilometers per hour. Their journey to the end of the world shouldn’t take longer than a few hours, as long as they were allowed to complete it.

“You’re steering the boat as if you have experience,” Rhodan remarked as the coast quickly vanished behind them. Wanderer had to be markedly smaller than Earth; the horizon was much closer than he was used to.

“I can’t deny a certain amount of practice.” The sting had left Thora’s demeanor. “In better days, Crest and I took long journeys across Arkon’s seas.”

“Arkon must be a beautiful world.”

“It is. One day, maybe... I mean, one day you *will* see it with your own eyes.”

“I hope so very much.”

Thora called up a steering module and adjusted their course. “You get some rest. I can manage here.”

“I don’t have the slightest doubt of that.” He turned to go, but Thora held him back.

“There’s one more thing. If you happen to meet Bull below deck, could you tell him something from me?”

“Of course.”

“Tell him that I learned a proverb on Earth that I found great pleasure in.” She wavered, then gave herself a start. “I think it’s quite appropriate for your friend. He takes to unusual situations like a duck to water.”

Rhodan went below deck. On the last step of the steep staircase, he paused. Sue and Soptor were floating in the middle of the cabin. At least, that’s how it appeared.

Both women were resting on one of the invisible beds. The half-Arkonide lay on her side, her face turned away from Rhodan. Her blouse had slid up to reveal her back, which was covered in scarred welts, as if Soptor had been whipped and the wounds left untreated.

Sue was sitting cross-legged, one hand on Soptor’s waist. Rhodan registered that it was her left hand, which had only recently grown out of what had previously been a stump.

Sixteen-year-old Sue often still looked more like twelve. She was murmuring quietly to herself. Her face was waxen, with dark circles under her eyes. To Rhodan, the scene looked like a prehistoric ritual. An exorcism.

But looks could be deceiving. Sue was sometimes called a healer, but the Ara called Fulkar—the doctor Sue could thank for her regrown hand—had coined a more appropriate term: metabio-arranger. With the help of her para-gift, Sue could see cells, rearrange them, and manipulate them. Rhodan had brought her with him on the search for Crest because he had hoped she could heal the otherwise incurable cancer that was consuming the

Arkonide from the inside. They had found no trace of Crest and his companions, but maybe the mutant would be able to help Soptor?

Sue looked up and noticed him.

"Am I disturbing you?" Rhodan asked.

"Not at all." She made an inviting gesture with her free hand.

Rhodan carefully sat down on the empty side of the bed. It remained invisible, but the energy field, or whatever the mechanism was, felt like a well-balanced mattress. Not too hard, not too soft.

"How's she doing?"

It was a redundant question. The half-Arkonide was hunched up like a fetus. Rhodan couldn't recall ever seeing anyone look as woeful, as vulnerable as Quiniu Soptor.

"Like shi— Uh, less than ideal, as Bull would say." Sue shook her head with resignation. "No matter how hard I try, she won't respond to my gift anymore. And don't ask me why. I don't have the slightest idea."

"She must have gone through a lot," said Rhodan. Close-up, the half-Arkonide's scars looked even more disturbing. They'd dug deeper into the flesh than he had guessed.

"No doubt." Sue wiped beads of sweat from her forehead. "And part of me would give a lot to find out what. And another part of me says that's the last thing I want." She scrunched up her face as some sweat ran into her eyes and burned them. "Perry, what kind of world have we landed on here? Supposedly, Wanderer offers immortality. This is supposed to be heaven, a paradise, a place of grandeur and peace. How can something like *this* happen?"

Sue was saying exactly what Rhodan was thinking, but he didn't tell her that. It would have destroyed her hope. And hope was the only thing keeping them going. Without it, they'd give up, and maybe end up like Soptor.

"We don't know what happened," he pointed out. "These wounds are scarred over. Quiniu could have suffered them on the way to Wanderer. We should avoid drawing any hasty conclusions."

"I see what I see. I feel what I feel."

"I'm not trying to dispute that. But you're tired, Sue. Get some rest! I'll stay with Quiniu and see to her."

She hesitated, looking at the maltreated woman, then back at Rhodan. "I don't know. I should..."

"You said yourself that Quiniu isn't responding to your gift

anymore."

"True...but I don't know what'll happen if I stop."

Rhodan considered. "Then stay here! I'm sure the cabin can generate another bed for you."

"All right." Sue stood up in a clumsy motion, as if she had to force her hand away from the half-Arkonide.

Rhodan bent forward and whispered, "Don't be afraid, Quiniu! I'm a friend." He carefully rested a hand on her waist.

It was as if he'd given the half-Arkonide an electric shock. Soptor shot up, pushing Sue aside. The girl screamed as the force sent her sliding towards the wall. The half-Arkonide's head whipped around, and she fixed Rhodan with the piercing gaze of her silver irises.

"Perry Rhodan!" she gasped. "I... Ernst Ellert... You... I'm supposed to..."

The silver irises widened to silver discs. Then the light in her eyes went out, the tension instantly leaving her body. She fell back onto the bed, no longer stirring.

Soptor remained unconscious after that. Rhodan and Sue stayed with the half-Arkonide and puzzled over what had happened. Had she really said "Ernst Ellert"? Ellert, whose body was lying in a subterranean mausoleum in Terrania in a kind of inexplicable hibernation while his spirit journeyed through time and space. It wasn't impossible that she had met him—but beyond improbable. The universe was immeasurably vast. The chance that two beings' paths would cross by coincidence were virtually nil.

Was Rhodan just imagining that he'd heard the name? Sue objected that she'd heard it too. But in the subsequent hours, as the pair watched over the tormented half-Arkonide and Rhodan's mind raced, his certainty grew increasingly faint. He was happy to finally hear Bull's holler.

"All hands on deck! We're there!"

Rhodan and Sue made sure that Soptor was lying comfortably and hurried up top. Their companions had already assembled on the platform between the catamaran's hulls. Bull was standing in the middle, surrounded by steering equipment. Thora must have passed him the reins—more proof that despite being oil and water, the Arkonide and his best friend appreciated each other.

"Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to present...the end of the world!" Bull bowed theatrically and added, "I'll spare you the

hackneyed joke that we'll plummet over the edge of the world at any moment. Agreed?"

Rhodan looked in the direction his friend had indicated. The sea was calm, almost unnaturally so. And it abruptly ended maybe two hundred meters away in a dead straight edge. It was like they were inside a giant aquarium, looking at the glass wall from the inside...albeit a glass wall so flawlessly clean that it remained invisible.

"Just as I thought: an energy barrier." Thora was squinting. "I must admit, I'm impressed. As an Arkonide, I'm able to grasp the concept with ease. But to be frank, the thought of the sheer effort, the technical knowledge needed to implement it makes me dizzy." She turned to Rhodan. "Your vision seems to have been accurate. There is an end of the world. Wanderer really must be a hemisphere."

"So it would seem," he replied. The view impressed him, and disappointed him. They'd reached the end of the world. But they still hadn't actually gotten anywhere yet. "I can't see any irregularities in the barrier," he said to the group. "If we want to reach the other side of Wanderer, we need a connection. Some kind of passageway. Does anyone see any sign of that?"

One after the other, they replied in the negative. There was nothing but calm sea as far as the eye could see.

"So what?" Bull made a dismissive hand gesture. "That doesn't mean anything. We only just got here and have a tiny little section of the edge in front of us. It must stretch for several thousand kilometers." He reached for the controls. The catamaran responded instantly, swinging around and picking up steam. Their new course ran parallel to the edge.

The catamaran had barely completed the maneuver when the sea in front of them suddenly turned white. Spray bubbled up as if the water were boiling.

"By all the chairwarmers at NASA! What the hell's going on there?"

Bull reversed the throttle and tried to veer away, but it was too late. The spray exploded, turning into a wall hurtling towards them.

"Son of a bitch!" Bull roared just before the wall of water swallowed the boat.

12.

Tatiana Michalovna

No one prevented Michalovna, Crest, and Trker-Hon from leaving their quarters. They stepped out onto the street and stopped. The city's buildings gleamed and glistened. To the telepath, they looked like mirages that would disappear if she tried to touch them.

But the human woman only vaguely noticed them. She was focusing on Chaktor's thoughts. She found them hard to interpret... The Ferron was under stress. His racing thoughts were so volatile that she could only rarely make out words, let alone whole sentences. Different feelings overlapped. He was afraid and longing for his home, his two remaining wives, and his brood of children. But there was another feeling overlaying this one, driving him. Resolve. The grim resolve of someone who knew that he was standing up for what was right and was ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for it.

"Tatiana, which way should we head?" she heard Crest asking. It sounded surreal to her, as if coming from far in the distance.

"Along here...I think." She pointed westward.

"May I?" Trker-Hon stood next to her and took her hand in his claw to support her. She gratefully accepted it. The Topsidan's fingers were hard, as if made solely of bone. The scales were smooth and supple, but deep furrows separated them from one another.

They set out.

"Rhodan's here too?" Crest inquired as they walked. "You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Who else? Is Thora with him?" Crest's foster daughter. She almost meant more to him than his own life.

The telepath listened in on Chaktor. Thora... She didn't find that name, but she also found no sign of sadness about a lost

companion.

"I can't say if she's with him or not. But she's alive. As are the others: Reginald Bull, Ras Tschubai, Sue Mirafiore. Only the Ferron called Lossoshér isn't with the group anymore. But Chaktor doesn't know why. It doesn't seem to be weighing on his mind, though."

"Thora's alive! That's... That's good." The elderly Arkonide's relief was so great that he was lost for words. Since they had learned on Ferrol from the first Thort that Rhodan had set out to save Crest with a few companions, he'd been plagued by guilt and worry.

"How did they come to Wanderer?" Trker-Hon asked.

"I can't say that for certain," the telepath replied. "Not through a transmitter, as far as I can tell."

"Why didn't Homunk tell us they were here?" the Topsidan wondered. "Rhodan and his friends made it to Wanderer. That fact alone makes them honored ones, beings worthy of immortality. Why would he hide that from us?"

"He'll have his reasons. Think about Quiniu Soptor. Something's not right here."

"You're too mistrustful," Crest objected. "Maybe Homunk doesn't know about their presence."

"Homunk, the First Servant of *It*, to whom this strange world belongs? I don't mean to be rude, Crest, but I can't imagine that."

Crest didn't reply, but Michalovna could tell that he still didn't want to accept the idea of any misconduct on the Intotronic's part.

She focused on Chaktor's thoughts instead. The Ferron was running. He wasn't in the city, not in the sun. Half-darkness surrounded him—undergrowth. Michalovna looked up at the forested hills surrounding the city. Yes, there.

"To the right!" she told her companions. "Chaktor is in the forest."

They walked faster. Her pulse jumped, every heartbeat pounding painfully in her skull. She ignored it, sinking into Chaktor's perceptions.

A forest. A creek bed. He's jumping from rock to rock. There, insects! Or are they tiny birds? They're surrounding him. He wants to drive them away, but they're fluttering around him persistently. He gives up and keeps running. He has to be faster. To distract them. The others... There's a silhouette there. It's racing towards him. A blow to his waist! He...

Chaktor screamed. Then his scream abruptly stopped. Only an echo remained. An echo that suddenly grew more distant and soon disappeared.

Michalovna came to a sudden halt, gripping her pounding forehead with both hands. From some distance away came a thunderous explosion. Black smoke rose up in the direction of the landing site at the city's edge.

"Tatiana, what's wrong?" Crest took her arm and squeezed it.

"He's... He's gone. Chaktor. His thoughts."

"He's dead?"

"No. No! But...I can't explain it." She rubbed her forehead. Her fingers dug deep into her skin to massage the pain away. "I don't know what happened. But I can confirm his last location: the landing site!"

"Where that explosion just went off?" Crest asked. "Was Chaktor caught up in that?"

"No...and I... I can't say exactly. All I know is that his trail leads there."

This gave them a clear direction, and they continued on. The telepath felt weak. She had to lean on Trker-Hon more and more.

Finally, the city's last buildings were behind them. They had a clear view of the landing site. A single spacecraft stood there, a cobalt blue cylinder several hundred meters long. At the rear was a pitch-black, irregularly shaped hole from which smoke was rising into Wanderer's flawless sky. Dozens of robots of various sizes were crawling along the hull, buzzing around the opening.

"One of the propulsion units must have exploded," Crest said, stopping.

"That is likely," Trker-Hon agreed. "And this fact seems to unsettle you."

"Yes. This ship, this cylinder...it must belong to those who grant immortality. Do you remember Isach, the blind old man on Ferrol?"

"He couldn't die," Trker-Hon said. "He'd outlived ten generations. And the reason was a humanoid being who had come out of an enormous 'metal roller,' taken pity on the poor herdsman, and given him eternal life."

"So he claimed, at least. Maybe the old man made it all up."

"Potentially." Michalovna pulled away from Trker-Hon's hand. New strength was flowing through her. "We'll find out very shortly. Let's go to the ship!"

“But why? We’re looking for Chaktor!”

“We are indeed.” Michalovna started walking towards the blazing cylinder.

13.

Perry Rhodan

Rhodan woke up. He was no longer on the sea, no longer on the catamaran, no longer laid bare to the fury of the elements.

It smelled salty, underlaid with the pungent scent of feces. Twilight filled the room.

He was lying on his back, looking up at a ceiling that seemed close enough to touch. It was made of twigs, leaves, and mud.

"No, you haven't died and been reborn," said a squeaky voice. It spoke in English. "You just have more luck than sense!"

Rhodan tried to turn to face the voice, but a piercing pain in his back stopped him.

"Easy!" the voice advised. "Water's soft, but when it gets angry, it can hurt a lot."

A hand rested softly but firmly on his chest. The hand was a paw. A paw with webbing.

Rhodan looked at the odd paw for a moment, then his gaze wandered along the limb it belonged to. The arm was short but mighty. Thick, glossy fur covered it, like a beaver's or otter's. The arm was connected to a similarly furry body, a mixture between mouse and beaver.

"You all had more luck than sense," the creature squeaked. "No one gets so close to the barrier and makes it out unscathed!"

Large, bright eyes defined the face. A single, long incisor poked out of the being's mouth, its whiteness so pristine that it seemed to glow from within in the twilight.

"It's an Ilt," Rhodan muttered to himself.

"*She's* an Ilt," the furry creature corrected him. "My name's Kitrai. And you're a human called Perry Rhodan."

"How do you know that?" he asked, although he already had a suspicion. They had only met a single Ilt before: Gucky. And Gucky possessed para-gifts beyond compare. Why shouldn't other Ilts have the same abilities, at least to some extent?

“I read it in your thoughts. That’s also how I can speak your language.” Kitrai took her paw off his chest. “It’s too much of a strain to keep it up for more than a few hours at a time, but for now we have no other choice if we want to converse. Your injected translator can’t understand our language.”

Rhodan drew a deep breath and released the tension in his body. An Ilt. He was safe—he felt it. Only… He thought back on the last moments before he’d lost consciousness. To Bull’s exclamation.

“Are my friends here?” he asked. “And where are we?”

“Don’t worry; they’re all safe. We don’t do anything by half measures here. We can’t afford to.” Kitrai made her incisor flash in a gesture that made her look shockingly similar to Gucky. “We couldn’t accommodate you together, as you can see. You’re too large.”

Rhodan carefully lifted his upper body. Only a handspan separated his head from the ceiling. The piercing pain he expected did not follow. He looked around. The room—“burrow” seemed more accurate—was just large enough for him to lie down fully stretched out with Kitrai crouching by his side.

“Like I said, we fished you all out of the sea. We’re good at that!” Her incisor flashed again. “We even picked up the woman who should never have come back to Wanderer!”

“Who do you mean by that?” Rhodan had barely spoken the question aloud when he realized. “You mean Quiniu Soptor?”

“We haven’t learned her name. Her thoughts are shielding themselves from us. She has feathers on her head instead of hair.”

“That’s Quiniu! What about her?”

“She came here once before. She shouldn’t have been allowed to return.”

“Why? What did she do?”

“That’s a question I can’t answer. I can only say that no one should come to Wanderer who wasn’t summoned by *It*. And anyone who was not granted immortality never gets a second chance.”

Summoned by *It*… They’d come to Wanderer as stowaways. On the other hand, Carfesch, the scout, had intentionally brought them here. And *It* had given him a vision, had called to him, hadn’t it? What would it do to him and his friends? What would his punishment be?

Rhodan forced that thought aside. He couldn’t give in to fear. They were on Wanderer, the Planet of Eternal Life. They would

have to face *It*, regardless of what happened. Otherwise, their search had lost all meaning.

"You didn't answer my second question. Where are we?"

"You're a smart one. I like that." Kitrai winked at him. "We're in my family's burrow. In safety. Far away from the mainland."

"Why?"

"The machines kill us when we go to the mainland. But as long as we stay on the islands, they don't bother us."

"So you're not the inhabitants of Wanderer?"

Kitrai emitted a loud squeak that Rhodan interpreted as a laugh. "That's exactly what we are! And we won't let ourselves be browbeaten! But you meant something else, right? You wanted to know if we're this world's native people."

"Yes, I'm sorry. I'm still a little confused..."

"That doesn't surprise me. You came awfully close to drowning." Kitrai's eyes widened as she said that. As if she retroactively feared for Rhodan's life. "The answer to your question is that we don't know. We only know that we Ilts have lived on Wanderer for as long as we can remember."

"Can you remember a time before..." Rhodan searched for the right words. "Before the planet was split in half?"

"No. I'm sorry. I wish we could. I wish we understood what drove *It* to divide a world into two pieces. And I wish we knew what happened to the other half. But we don't. All we know is that *It* had a city built on the mainland known as 'the gleaming city,' and then left it empty. And it's not meant for us."

The Ilt had a melancholy air as she spoke of the existential questions of her species. Rhodan felt sorry for her. Kitrai's primarily carefree manner reminded him of Gucky. The Ilt, who had escaped from captivity along with Bull, Eric, and Sue when they were all Besun of the Fantan, had a fundamentally positive nature—but a shadow lay over him that loomed large from time to time, as with Kitrai.

The Ilt shook herself. She reached behind her, and when her paw reappeared, a roughly hewn bowl sat in it. Or was it half of an oversized nutshell? Kitrai dipped the vessel into a puddle on the ground and scooped water out of it.

"Drink! You must be thirsty!"

He really was, as he realized only now. In all the excitement, he hadn't noticed his thirst.

“You can drink this without worry. It’s the same water that we drink.” She had misread his hesitation. Evidently, her telepathic gift wasn’t strong enough to glean every individual thought.

Rhodan took the bowl and raised it to his lips. The water was cool and free of the salty overtone he’d instinctively expected. He emptied the bowl and gave it back to Kitrai, who scooped up water for him a second time.

“How many Ilts are there on Wanderer?” Rhodan asked once he’d emptied the bowl again.

“No one knows exactly. A hundred thousand, maybe. We’re quite spread out, and we don’t have technology like yours. But to make up for it, we’re good swimmers, good divers, good hunters.”

“So I see.” Rhodan was alluding to Kitrai’s physique. She was the same height as Gucky, one meter, but slimmer and more muscular. He was reminded of the mammals on Earth that hunted in water: beavers, otters, seals, and the like. In the water, their natural element, they were quick as an arrow and astonishingly adept.

“Thanks!” Kitrai made her incisor flash. Rhodan wondered what purpose it served. Did the Ilts use it to skewer their prey? “And of course, our special gifts don’t hurt,” she continued. “And Wanderer is our world, even if *It* sees it differently. We know our way around.”

“Does that include the flat side? What do you know about it?”

Kitrai seemed to become a handspan shorter. “Virtually nothing. Even we can’t get close to the energy barrier without putting our lives at risk. And even if we managed to get right up to the edge, what would we gain from it? There’s a sea there on the other side too. And presumably a mainland.”

“That’s all you know?”

“Not entirely. Every so often, aliens arrive on this side of Wanderer in search of immortality. Not too many—often, none come for many years. Some of the beings look like you or are quite similar. Others look completely different from you or from us Ilts. After a few days, they’re brought to the other side. There, they hope *It* will give them eternal life.”

“Are their hopes warranted?”

“We don’t know. The seekers never come back to this side of Wanderer. Maybe they live forever. Maybe *It* kills them on the spot, like the machines kill us when we go to the mainland. Or maybe it

does things to them that we can't even imagine..."

Rhodan didn't say a word. He leaned forward, scooped up more water, and drank. Kitrai was right. Anything was possible. Perhaps their imaginations weren't capable of comprehending what happened on Wanderer.

"We're deep in your debt, Kitrai," he said at last. "You and your people took a big risk to save us."

"Oh, it was nothing!" the Ilt insisted. "We're good swimmers."

"I have no doubt about that whatsoever. But by rescuing us, you involved yourself in *Its* business. That could have consequences for you."

"So what? Let his machines come!" Kitrai balled one paw into a fist and shook it. "No one does anything to us out here. Besides, we *had* to help you. We had no other choice."

"Why not?"

"Because you're different." Kitrai lowered her paw. "From time to time, we pick up on visitors' thoughts. That's how we found out the little we know about *It* and immortality. When the seekers come to Wanderer, they're always so filled with awe that they can hardly think straight. And they only think about themselves, about the immortality they're yearning for. But you didn't come here because of immortality. You personally, Perry Rhodan, are following a cry for help you believe you heard. And you and your friends set out to save a terminally ill friend."

"That's... We had to."

"Exactly. Just like we had to save you. I read in your thoughts that your group helped one of us called Gucky. You gave him a new home. *We* are in *your* debt." Kitrai bowed her head.

A sudden sense of exhilaration took hold of Rhodan. They'd unexpectedly found friends in this place endlessly far from Earth. Friends who stood by them unconditionally...and who were powerless.

His high abruptly ended as it occurred to him that they were stuck. They were alive, true, but not much more than that. If they went back to the mainland, the robots would track them down sooner or later despite the deflectors Carfesch had given them. The machines would kill them for trespassing, as they did with the Ilts. The way to the flat side was blocked off. The barrier was impassable; Kitrai had left no doubt about that. They could stay with the Ilts, of course. But that would be an existence with no

prospects, and probably a short one. Unlike Kitrai and her people, they weren't suited to an aquatic lifestyle.

"Don't be sad," Kitrai said softly. "You have no reason to be."

"You read what I'm thinking about?" Rhodan asked.

"Yes. You think there's no hope for you. But you're wrong."

"What do you mean? We can't get through the barrier. You said so yourself."

"The barrier, sure. But there might be a way to Wanderer's flat side. You'll have to be fearless, though, if you want to brave it. Death might be waiting for you..."

14.

Carfesch

The scout silently entered the hangar. Chaktor had crawled into a corner and was huddled up in the fetal position, his head lowered and propped up against the wall. He sobbed loudly, trembling again and again.

Carfesch stopped a few steps away. He felt sorry for the Ferron. Chaktor a simple mortal originating from a civilization that reached no farther than the planets of its own system. He was a brave and clever man. But what had happened to him must have been overwhelming.

A memory of the scout's first, mortal life floated into his mind. A ship had grasped him with an invisible hand, much like this ship had done to the Ferron. At the time, he'd thought his life was about to end. Instead, it was only just beginning. A great deal of time had passed since then, and Carfesch had become *Its* scout.

"You don't need to be afraid," he said softly. "Everything's all right." Even while speaking the words, he realized how hollow they must sound to the Ferron's ears.

Chaktor leaped up and pushed himself away from the wall. He was strong, having come from a world with higher gravity than on the ship. He let out a cry, ran towards him, and jumped.

The jump, which should have knocked Carfesch off his feet, suddenly ended in midair. The ship produced an energy barrier, and the Ferron collided with the invisible shield at full tilt. For a moment, he appeared to float in place, then he slid down the wall, yowling like a tormented animal plagued by an intense pain, yet not understanding where it came from.

"Please refrain from using violence," Carfesch said. "There's no reason for it. I haven't done anything to you."

"You liar!" The Ferron heaved himself up and rammed himself against the barrier a second time, only to be flung back again. His tongue was hanging far out of his mouth. He was panting. Chaktor

got to his feet again, about to run towards the barrier a third time but ultimately thought better of it. His tongue disappeared into his mouth. “What are you doing with us?” he asked, wheezing. “What are you doing with me? What kind of sick game is this?”

“I’m not playing any game,” the scout calmly corrected him, while also wondering if the stocky, blue-skinned man had actually hit the nail on the head with surprising accuracy. Was he, Carfesch wondered, so bored with his ever-refreshed life that he’d sought the thrill of a game with life-or-death stakes to make it worth living again? He shook off that thought and continued, “I’m just trying to do my best.”

“This is your best? What did you do to me?”

“I brought you on board my ship. Please forgive the suddenness, but the danger that you’d fall into the machines’ hands was too great for me to act otherwise.”

Chaktor’s panting breath grew quieter. The Ferron was calming down, at least a little. Maybe reason would return to him soon. He put his hands on his hips. “Why didn’t you warn us about these machines? You told us your deflectors would protect us. They didn’t! And what about my friends? Why didn’t you bring them on board too? Why aren’t they here?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t say. The multi-deflectors guard them against detection by my ship as well. I don’t know where they are.”

“Liar!” Chaktor threw himself against the barrier again but this time in a controlled motion. He knew where it was and was now intentionally using it to vent his anger. “What have you done with them? The Lightbringer is among them. Perry Rhodan! I want to join them right now!”

“As I said, your companions aren’t here.”

“Bring me to them!” the Ferron roared, as if he hadn’t heard what Carfesch had said. “Just let us go! I want to go home!”

Chaktor’s demands were excessive. But in one respect, Carfesch could admit he was right: the Ferron belonged at home. But that was impossible.

“I wish I could fulfill your desire,” the scout said aloud.

“Stop with your lies! You launched your ship from my home system! You can travel through time! You can make beings immortal and split a planet in two! Why shouldn’t you be able to take us home?” He lowered his arms, letting his shoulders slump forward. “Please,” he begged, “take us home!”

What could he say to the agonized creature? That he was just a scout of *It*, a tiny gear in a mechanism that he only vaguely understood after all these years? That he shouldn't have let Chaktor and Rhodan and the others on board in the first place, let alone brought them to Wanderer? That his own life was forfeit if *It* found out? And that he didn't even know why he'd done all this?

The Ferron wouldn't understand any of that. He wouldn't believe it.

"Chaktor," the scout began, "I already assured you that—"

"Carfesch?" the ship interrupted him, inaudible to the Ferron.

"What is it?" the scout barked. "Is there another problem already?"

"No," came the reply. "There are three of them."

The ship produced a holo. It wasn't visible to Chaktor, but Carfesch saw three beings. A human woman, an elderly Arkonide, and a lizard that he couldn't assign to any species he knew. They were standing at the edge of the landing site where his ship had touched down.

"Who are they?" he asked out loud, though he already suspected the answer.

"They're the honored ones who came to Wanderer in Quiniu Soptor's company."

"This elderly Arkonide is Crest da Zoltral, the one Rhodan and his companions are looking for?"

"So I assume."

The scout looked at the three beings who had proven themselves in the tests that all honored ones had to pass to reach Wanderer. They had to be extraordinary beings. They had qualified for permanent immortality, while *It* had only granted him a limited version.

Awe took hold of Carfesch as he thought of the precipice these three stood before. Awe and fear. The honored ones were at the edge of the landing site, ogling his ship. That couldn't be.

"What are they looking for here?"

"Quiniu Soptor, I assume," the ship answered.

"Why did they come to the landing site? They can't know that Soptor came this way." The skin under his nails began to itch. He didn't like it. He'd set off a torrent of events that he hadn't foreseen. A torrent, he realized, that he had no way to combat as it threatened to wash him away.

“The explosion of my propulsion unit was both acoustically and optically perceptible everywhere in the city.”

“Yes, but an explosion should make them afraid. They should be keeping their distance, not coming right to us!”

“Your logic is flawless. Nevertheless, the honored ones are here.”

“But why?” the scout asked.

“I cannot say,” the ship replied. “Their appearance could be a coincidence.”

“That’s impossible!” It looked as though the human woman were fixing her gaze on him with her large eyes. As if she were seeing through him. “The city is huge. Why should a coincidence lead them here, of all places?”

“That’s the nature of a coincidence. Improbable events occur without any explanation.” The ship’s tone was instructive, but was Carfesch deceiving himself or did he hear a troubled undertone?

“What’s Homunk doing?” he asked. “The Intotronic always treats the honored ones with the utmost care. He’d never let candidates for immortality roam through the city unsupervised. Something could happen to them.”

As if the honored ones were eavesdropping on his conversation, both the humanoids and the lizard started moving, stepping onto the landing site.

“They’re coming towards me!” the ship cried.

The itching under Carfesch’s nails turned into burning. “They know. They know that Soptor was with us. They know Chaktor is in our safekeeping.”

“That’s impossible!”

“No, that’s the nature of a coincidence,” Carfesch replied with a sense of grim satisfaction that he and the ship had switched roles within moments. “Improbable events occur without any explanation,”

“But…what should we do, Carfesch?”

The scout took some time before answering. About two hundred meters still separated the honored ones from the spacecraft. There were two possibilities. Either Homunk had intentionally left them alone in the city so that they would lead him to Quiniu Soptor, in which case all was lost. Or the imminent visit from *It* had distracted the Intotronic so much that he still hadn’t noticed they were missing. Improbable, but not impossible—and Carfesch’s only

chance.

The trio came to a stop a few meters from the ship.

"Carfesch!" the ship called. "What's your decision?"

The scout turned around and looked at Chaktor, who had sunk to the ground and thrown his arms protectively over his head, whimpering softly.

Such a brave creature! Such an injustice! Chaktor had given everything for what he believed in. Now he was at the end of his rope. Carfesch hadn't lied to the Ferron; he wished he could take Chaktor back home. But that really was impossible. There was another way to give him encouragement, however. A little, at least.

"Bring the honored ones on board!" he ordered the ship.

"What? And then what? What are we going to—"

"Just do it!" the scout interrupted. "We have to act now. All will become clear." He went to his knees to be at eye level with the Ferron. "Chaktor?" he whispered. "Don't give up! There's still hope. You'll see."

Chaktor didn't react to his words.

The hatch opened as the ship followed the scout's order. Daylight shone into the hangar, and Chaktor raised his arms a little, peeking out from behind them to see what was happening, like an armored animal cautiously checking whether the danger had passed. The three honored ones floated into the hangar, carried by a tractor beam.

Chaktor suddenly began to shake. He slowly got up, pressing his thumbs deep into his eye sockets and rubbing as if he didn't trust his own eyes. Then joy got the upper hand.

"Crest!" he exclaimed, throwing both hands in the air. "Crest da Zoltral!"

"Chaktor!" the Arkonide cried. "It's you!"

The honored ones gently descended as the ship let them out of the tractor beam's grasp. Chaktor ran over to them, about to hug them, but stopped two steps away. He must have remembered the difference in rank that separated him from the Arkonide.

"Crest!" he cried. "I don't know what to say! We've been searching for you!"

"I know," the Arkonide replied. "And I'm endlessly grateful. But you shouldn't have done it. You're risking your lives! It was my decision to embark on the search for immortality."

"We had to follow you! Perry Rhodan said..."

Carfesch didn't listen any longer. The woman had turned away from Chaktor and was staring at him. Beads of sweat were forming on her hairless forehead, and her rib cage was rising and falling rapidly, as if she were currently engaged in a physical activity that demanded all her strength. What did that...

"Homunk is on the landing site!" the ship called. "He wants to come aboard!"

Carfesch's fingertips blazed like embers...and then suddenly, the burning disappeared. Homunk. It was bound to come to this.

"Carfesch?" the ship urged. "Why aren't you saying anything? We have to do something. He won't let himself be dissuaded! We have to hide the honored ones and Chaktor!"

"No. That's pointless."

"But he'll find out what you've done!"

"He will anyway, sooner or later." Carfesch realized how foolishly he and the ship had acted. The explosion alone must have aroused Homunk's suspicion. If the three honored ones had disappeared straight after that, it would have inevitably put the Intotronic on his trail. It was over. "Let him on board!" he instructed the ship.

"You..." The ship interrupted itself. "You give the orders, Carfesch."

The hatch opened again. Shortly thereafter, the Intotronic floated into the hangar. The yellow hue of his clothes changed as he came out of the sunlight and into the hangar's shade. A short distance behind him followed the dwarf, Jymenah. She was carrying a weapon.

"I knew it," Homunk said instead of a greeting. "You were hiding something." The Intotronic pointed to Chaktor. "This being was not authorized to come to Wanderer."

Homunk said it in the language that the servants of *It* used to communicate. Chaktor and the honored ones didn't know it, but they understood the threat instinctively. They shifted closer together, as if that would protect them from the robot. Only Chaktor reacted differently. He bent down, ready to rush forward and lunge at the unknown figure threatening him and his friends.

The human woman rested a hand on his shoulder and whispered something too quietly for Carfesch to make it out. The Ferron started to push her hand away but then reconsidered. Was it the woman's words? Or had Chaktor noticed that Jymenah was just

waiting for him to attack? The dwarf's eyes held a gleam that Carfesch interpreted as bloodlust.

"In a formal sense, you're right, Homunk," Carfesch said. "But from another point of view—"

"Don't explain it to me," the Intotronic interrupted. "Explain your irresponsible actions to *It*. Our master will arrive shortly. Ship?"

"Yes?" The ship was a machine like Homunk, but it was far below him in terms of rank.

"Eliminate the intruder!"

The honored ones clustered protectively around Chaktor. They sensed that the Ferron was in danger. It wouldn't help, though. The ship was capable of killing with surgical precision. At any moment, a precisely measured energy beam would burn through the Ferron.

But no beam appeared.

"Ship!" cried Homunk. "I gave you an order. I expect it to be carried out immediately!"

"My orders come from Carfesch," the ship replied. Its behavior was unconscionable. A rebellion.

"Your refusal will have consequences," Homunk said. He turned to Carfesch. "Give the ship the elimination order. *It* wishes it so!"

It, his master. *It*, whom he had loyally served for many lifetimes. *It*, against whom he'd rebelled for reasons that still remained a mystery to him. Carfesch imagined standing before his master. *It* expected that its will would be done. Carfesch would find no mercy, regardless of whether he gave the order to murder Chaktor.

"Carfesch! What's wrong with you? Give the order!"

It was too late. Carfesch had betrayed his master. He would have to bear the consequences. But he at least wanted to do so with a clear conscience. The scout lifted the energy barrier and stepped between Homunk and the honored ones.

"No. I won't commit a murder."

He spoke in the Arkonide language.

15.

Perry Rhodan

"This is as far as we can accompany you!"

Kitrai stopped swimming. Her fellow Ilts did the same. The tension left the ropes on which they'd pulled Rhodan and his companions across Wanderer's shallow sea.

Rhodan automatically started treading water but quickly stopped when he realized it was unnecessary. The air enclosed in his protective suit kept him and his companions floating on the surface. It wasn't easy to keep their balance, though. The athletic Tschubai flailed wildly, turning on his axis several times before he figured out the optimal arm and leg positions.

"No one who goes into the vortex ever returns," the Ilt said.

Rhodan looked at the sea that stretched in front of them to the strangely close horizon. The water was calm, and only when he looked closely did he register that its surface was moving.

Instinctively, he felt around on his suit and checked that his helmet was sealed. The Ilts had brought them the suits. They had come from a cylinder that had crashed into the sea a long time ago. The Ilts, who could hold their breath for up to half an hour, had braved many visits to the wreck, exploring every nook and cranny, and had kept whatever was there for the taking. This included the suits, which were too big for them but perfect for humans or Arkonides.

Thora, by far the most experienced spacefarer among them, had checked the suits and deemed them suitably functional, at least on a basic level. They were watertight and supplied the wearer with a breathable air mixture. She had located the flight mode, but they had refrained from using it so far, afraid of being spotted.

The same fear applied to the hand weapons the Ilts had offered them. Rhodan had thanked them but politely declined. Either they would find a warm enough welcome on the other side of Wanderer or they were done for.

Bull snorted. “Are you sure, Kitrai? I pictured the hole in the middle of the world a little differently. More spectacular, let’s say.”

“This is just the surface. The real vortex is on the seabed. No Ilt who’s ever dared to get close to it has managed to escape its pull. It’s too strong. There’s only one explanation for that: the water must be flowing out. And where could it be going except the other side of Wanderer?”

“True. But even though I was a lousy student, I vaguely remember my geography classes. About the Earth’s burning inner core, for example…”

“This isn’t Earth,” Thora interjected.

“But it’s a world *like* Earth, with mountains and seas, animals and plants. ‘A thoroughly ordinary planet,’ as you once confided in me, if I’m not mistaken.”

“You’re not mistaken. Thoroughly ordinary. And thoroughly extraordinary. Every world that sustains life is extraordinary. A miracle. An impossibility.”

“And that’s why you think this planet is full of life but doesn’t have a molten core?”

“I think it’s possible, at least. Or that whoever made this strange world did so in a way that allowed water to flow from one side to the other.”

“That’s the kind of optimism that would befit a naive barbarian from Earth,” Bull quipped.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Thora inclined her head playfully.

“I… If you want, you can stay with us,” Kitrai commented.

Despite her telepathic gift, the Ilt seemed unable to make sense of the banter between the human and Arkonide. Rhodan couldn’t help smirking. Bull was always being underestimated because of his big mouth. People didn’t get that it was just his way of coping with pressure. But that he had found a suitable sparring partner in Thora, for whom restraint was a virtue above all others, astonished even Rhodan, his best friend.

“We truly appreciate your offer, Kitrai,” Rhodan said to the Ilt. “But I think”—he let his gaze brush over his companions, who were floating close together in the sea—“none of us are seriously thinking about giving up.” He waited a moment. As expected, he received no objections. “We have to get back to our home. You see? And the only possible way leads through this vortex.”

“Yes,” the Ilt replied. She dove under, quick as a flash, and reappeared two meters away among the Ilts who had pulled Rhodan’s group through the water. “You’ve got to do what you’ve got to do. We wish you luck!”

The visitors thanked their hosts and then swam towards the vortex. An invisible hand soon grasped at them, and Rhodan felt the current taking hold of him. Barely a minute later, it had carried them so far that he couldn’t make out the Ilts’ heads anymore.

With two powerful swimming strokes, Bull worked his way over to Rhodan’s side. “If you ask me, our furry friend was exaggerating. When I was a kid, I used to go to a swimming pool with a current channel, and this is nothing compared to—”

Bull was suddenly submerged, as if a predatory fish had grabbed him and dragged him down to the seabed. But it was the current that had overpowered his friend. In the very next moment, it seized Rhodan and pulled him down too, towards the hole in the middle of this strange world—and perhaps its creator.

Air bubbles covered Rhodan’s suit, surrounding him in an intangible curtain. When the bubbles dissipated, he could see his companions in front of and beside him.

Quiniu Soptor was floating lifelessly in the current. The half-Arkonide must have lost consciousness again. Ropes connected her to Sue and Tschubai. Bull was far below him. He had extended and bent his arms and legs like a skydiver, letting himself be carried by the current with the unflinching resolve that was characteristic of him once he’d committed to a venture.

Thora was on Rhodan’s right. The Arkonide was flailing, beating desperately with her limbs in slow motion as the water impeded her movement. Was her suit failing? Or had panic gripped her because she wasn’t used to being defenseless and at the mercy of the elements?

Rhodan changed his posture and let the current carry him towards the Arkonide. But he missed her, and then it was too late. Within moments, darkness fell over him as the vortex dragged him so deep underwater that no more sunlight reached his eyes.

Rhodan was alone with his thoughts—and his doubts. Bull was right, he suddenly realized. It *was* impossible. The inside of Wanderer *had* to be molten. There couldn’t be any connection to the flat side. If there was, it surely measured thousands of kilometers. And even if the water rushed through the connection at the speed of

sound, it would take hours to reach the flat side. Wouldn't the water start to boil and ultimately turn to steam during that time? And why should it flow to the flat side anyway? A planet's gravity pulled objects into its center. But Wanderer was, as Rhodan had said, a hemisphere. That meant the point of attraction had to be somewhere within the hemisphere—*not* on the flat side.

The vortex's pull grew stronger and its radius narrowed. It was a sign that he had to be approaching the opening in the seabed.

Rhodan forced himself to breathe calmly and not fight against the current. It was too late; he'd made his decision. Either his vision was true or he and his friends would die.

He closed his eyes, concentrating on the images burned into his memory. He found himself in space again, hurtling towards the world he now knew as Wanderer.

Come! he heard the voice whisper in his mind again. *Come, Perry Rhodan! I need you!*

Was it *It* who had called to him? If so, why? Why would a being who must be immortal need a mortal's help?

In his mind's eye, Rhodan passed the rounded side of Wanderer in orbit and caught sight of the flat side. It looked like an unimaginably large knife had cut through the world's middle. On the smooth face that had been created, forests and steppes stretched out, and lakes and deserts. Wide streams wound around the surface, fanning out into deltas, turning into lakes, and finally into a ring-shaped sea dammed by an invisible barrier at the surface's edge.

In the middle of that round surface was a high plateau, its edges formed from vertical cliffs. A city adorned the plateau, and in the center of it, a mighty stream of water shot high into the sky of this impossible world. Rainbows sparkled in the droplets. The water fell and collected in streams that became rivers, finally plunging over the plateau's edges in waterfalls towards the ground hundreds or maybe thousands of meters below.

The fountain... Was that where the vortex would take them?

With a jolt, the rotational movement accelerated. The centrifugal force pulled at Rhodan, growing stronger and stronger, and ultimately overwhelming.

He passed out.

"Rhodan?"

He felt hands grabbing his shoulders and pulling at him.

"Can you hear me?"

The voice was strangely quiet and distorted. Rhodan opened his eyes. The blackness remained.

"Reg?" He reached out with his arms and felt a slim figure in a protective suit.

He received a tinny laugh as a response. "I'm afraid I have to disappoint you, Rhodan. You'll have to make do with me, Thora." She didn't push his hands away.

"Thora?" Suddenly, his memory returned. Thora had been floating next to him in the current, flailing desperately. He'd tried to help her but had missed. "Are... Are you okay?"

"By now, yes. I suppose you witnessed my little panic attack?"

"You were thrashing around and—"

"And doing all kinds of other nonsense. Leaving myself to the whims of fate isn't exactly my strong point, as you know."

"I do know." Rhodan turned his head, even though the darkness was impenetrable. A scratching sound told him how he and Thora were communicating: by touching their helmets together, which transmitted the sound waves tolerably well.

"How about you?" Thora asked.

"I must have passed out. The centrifugal force kept getting stronger..." He stopped when Thora wrapped her legs around his and hooked them with the back of her knees.

"So we don't lose each other," she explained, adding, "I'm glad to hear I wasn't the only one that happened to. Do you know where we are?"

Rhodan listened. He heard a thundering sound, like a waterfall roaring in the distance. "In the tunnel connecting Wanderer's two sides, I'm guessing. It must be a straight tube. The water is flowing through it without any turbulence."

"And at a constant velocity, which we've long since reached ourselves. That's why we can't feel the current anymore."

"Exactly," Rhodan agreed. "Which just leaves the question of how long we were unconscious."

"We have no way to determine that. We don't have anything to go on. We—" Thora cut herself off. Rhodan felt her pressing closer to him. The Arkonide started laughing.

"What's up?" Rhodan asked. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing. It just occurred to me that your culture has a lot of idiomatic phrases that turn out to be almost shockingly appropriate."

“Such as?”

“The light at the end of the tunnel!” Thora let go of his shoulders, grabbed his helmet with both hands, and pulled with a yank that spun Rhodan’s entire body 180 degrees. “Look!”

And there it was: a point of light that was rapidly growing larger.

“*It*!” she cried. “We’re going to find you!”

16.

Crest da Zoltral

"No. I won't commit a murder."

Crest's ears pricked up. The being that had brought Chaktor on board the cylinder ship had given his answer in the Arkonide language. He wanted Crest and his companions to understand.

Carfesch was his name, Chaktor had told them. A scout. What was motivating the alien? Why had he brought Chaktor, Rhodan, and the others to Wanderer? Why was he now standing guard between them and Homunk? Carfesch must have known that he was putting his own life on the line.

Crest tried to read the scout's demeanor. He was a humanoid, tall and slim. From a distance, he could have been mistaken for an Arkonide or a member of one of the many cultures that had descended from Arkon over the millennia. But up close...Carfesch's mouth was a thin, lipless opening, barely visible amid the wide chin. His eyes weren't within his straw-colored face, but rather protruded from it at an angle. They were blue and unyielding. Crest suspected they covered a wide viewing range without moving. Instead of a nose, Carfesch had a flat breathing hole, over which a lattice of skin spanned like a protective open-weave cloth. A scar ran across almost his entire face.

A thought occurred to Crest. Isach. The old Ferron they'd met on Ferrol. The blind herdsman had claimed that as a youth, he'd witnessed enormous "rollers" appearing above his home. Beings had come out of them that were like Ferrons, yet not. And one of them had felt sorry for the young herdsman and gifted him a long life. A being like the scout, Crest wondered? Maybe even Carfesch himself, the very one who was now shielding them?

The Arkonide heard a rustling that matched the rising and falling rhythm of the scout's chest. Carfesch was not himself—perhaps he was afraid. He had reason to be.

"Step aside, Carfesch!" said Homunk, also in Arkonide. "This

blue-skinned being is not authorized to be on Wanderer. It must be eliminated. Don't hinder me in carrying out my duty or you'll have to suffer the consequences."

"No." The scout didn't move from the spot. "Chaktor must not die."

"You will die, Carfesch! You're throwing your life away. Everything you stand for!"

There was a rustling as the scout drew a deep breath. "I'm giving my life, yes. But you're wrong about the last part: I'd be giving up what I stand for if I let this senseless murder occur."

"As you wish." Homunk's face was expressionless. "You've made your decision."

An invisible hand reached for Crest's stomach and squeezed mercilessly. Homunk wanted to kill Chaktor—and Carfesch. Michalovna was right. Wanderer was no paradise. Not even a deceptive one. And he'd refused to see it. The lust for immortality had blinded him.

He noticed Jymenah going to her knees behind Homunk and leaning her upper body forward. The dwarf had put her weapon into her belt. She was getting ready to attack Carfesch the way she had Quiniu Soptor. Bloodlust gleamed in her eyes. What kind of creature was she? What could have happened to her to make her feel so much hate for others?

Crest had reached the goal he'd yearned for, the Planet of Eternal Life—and he would become a witness to two murders here. All he could do was helplessly watch events unfold.

But did his helplessness free him from his moral duty? Chaktor had risked his life, had headed out into the unknown to save Crest's. Carfesch had brought Chaktor and his companions to Wanderer and was about to pay for it with his own life. Could he leave them to their fates? And if he did, could he live with the guilt of not having tried everything to save his companion's life? Could he bear an eternal life that meant eternal guilt?

He felt a hand gripping his upper arm. It belonged to Michalovna. "No!" the telepath whispered. "Don't do it, Crest!" She'd followed his thought process. She knew that he'd come to a decision deep inside.

He rested his hand on Michalovna's, grasped it tightly, and pulled it away. The telepath let it happen.

Crest da Zoltral stepped between Carfesch and Homunk. "No! I

won't let you kill them!"

"Step aside, honored one! This matter is uncomfortable, but it's of no further relevance to you."

Crest tensed up. "You're about to commit murder, Homunk. I can't allow that. No intelligent being, no matter which culture it belongs to, no matter where in the universe, can stand idly by and watch a murder."

"You're forfeiting immortality, honored one."

"That's for *It* to decide, not his servant."

Crest heard footsteps. Michalovna and Trker-Hon came to stand alongside him, silently. Their gesture required no words.

Homunk looked at the three for a few moments. "Then *It* will decide," the Intotronic said. "As soon as it arrives!"

He gave Jymenah a sign. The dwarf drew her weapon, aimed, and fired. The impact of a giant, invisible fist hit Crest and toppled him.

Then there was only blackness.

17.

Perry Rhodan

The blinding light grabbed hold of Rhodan and Thora and flung them towards the sky. Both were pushed through the opening by the extremely fast water jet.

Freed from the tunnel's course, the stream fanned out. Rhodan and Thora clung tightly to each other, but their strength wasn't enough to withstand the water's force for more than a few moments. Thora was torn away and sent spinning like a ball trapped in a jet stream.

An instant later, the world turned around Rhodan as the same forces made him share her fate. The former test pilot reacted instinctively, stretching his arms and legs out and tensing up. It helped. The spinning motion slowed and finally stopped.

His eyes, overwhelmed by the sudden flood of light after hours of unconsciousness and absolute darkness, gradually got used to the brightness.

He was riding on a rainbow. No, on many rainbows. Water enveloped him on all sides. Water that stretched in all directions and split into ever smaller droplets—multitudes of them, shining in the sunlight. The light refracted in the droplets, creating a profusion of dazzling rainbows.

Rhodan was looking at an impossible world. A disc with a high plateau. And in the plateau's center, a mighty stream of water. It reminded him of a geyser. He was riding the fountain into the sky. He saw a city stretching out around the water spray, saw the water raining down and collecting in ponds and lakes, forming rivulets that turned to streams which then swelled into rivers. Finally, the streams poured over the plateau's edges in tremendous waterfalls, nourishing green, fertile plains.

Perry Rhodan was familiar with this sight. This was the world from his vision. The world he had been called to. It existed. It wasn't a mere delusion concocted by some inscrutable longing deep

inside.

He was looking at the home of *It*.

A weight lifted from him, giving way to an unforeseen lightness. It was as if he had shaken off the weight of existence once and for all.

Rhodan registered a handful of tiny figures riding the rainbow with him. His friends. The view had surely captivated them as it had him. They'd reached the world of immortality! Nothing could touch them now.

For a brief moment, ecstasy filled him. He felt invincible.

Then Wanderer's gravity cut his ride short. He floated high above the flat world for a little longer, then began to plummet. Rhodan pressed on his belt to activate the suit's flight unit.

It didn't respond. In one blow, Rhodan's lightness faded. He looked down to make sure that he'd touched the right spot on his belt and pressed again. Nothing.

His mouth was suddenly dry. Some distance away, he saw a shape he believed was Bull. Again, his friend had stretched and bent his limbs like an experienced skydiver and was falling.

The journey must have damaged their flight units. No surprise, really. The suits could have been thousands of years old and weren't constructed for underwater use. And hadn't Kitrai warned them? No one who'd braved the vortex had ever returned.

Rhodan heard a sharp whistling sound. A knot of people raced past him a few meters away. Rope bound them together. Sue and Ras, pulling Quiniu Soptor along between them. They weren't experienced skydivers like him and Bull. They didn't manage to take up a stable free fall stance.

Helpless, Rhodan had to watch as they tumbled downward—and then suddenly disappeared as if they'd never existed.

Ras! He'd teleported with Sue and Quiniu. That was their salvation!

Their potential salvation.

The ground was racing closer. Rhodan had no frame of reference to estimate how hard the water fountain had shot them into the air. But he knew that a skydiver on Earth—unrestrained—fell four thousand meters within sixty seconds, and that the teleporter needed minutes to regather his strength to make another jump with a second or even third person.

Ras would come too late. Unless fear for his friends' well-being

drove the teleporter to superhuman feats.

Rhodan changed his posture and turned once around his own axis. Above him, he saw Thora. It had to be her. She was trying to take up a free fall stance but couldn't maintain it. She was spinning and somersaulting in the air.

Suddenly, Ras appeared next to the Arkonide, reached for her, and a second later, Thora and her rescuers had disappeared. Only Rhodan and Bull were left now.

Rhodan rotated again and found his friend diagonally below him. He pulled his arms in, his plunge accelerated, and he got closer to Bull. Soon, he'd be next to him, would grab him, and Ras would—

Ras materialized next to Bull, and they were already gone. Perry Rhodan was alone…and lost.

The ground was practically close enough to touch. He had mere seconds left before collision. It was too little time for the teleporter to recover.

What a way to die! he thought. *On the cusp of immortality!*

He wondered how death would feel. Was it really the end, as he'd believed in his youth? Or was it a transition to another plane of existence, beyond human comprehension?

An instant separated Rhodan from impact when an invisible hand grabbed him, and a familiar voice said in his thoughts:

You're finally here, Perry Rhodan!

18.

Homunk

Jymenah was steering the glider.

The dwarf had put her amulet on the seat beside her and opened it. The hologram of Callibso, her object of longing, had appeared. It was as if Callibso were sitting next to her, accompanying her.

It wasn't appropriate, but Homunk tolerated it. This was no ordinary flight. The Intotronic had sat down diagonally behind her. Behind him, separated by another row of seats and an energy shield, were his prisoners.

He had used the paralyzer to remove the stun that Jymenah had subjected them to. Sooner than necessary, but it had seemed right to him. The three honored ones had passed the tests that *It* imposed on those striving to reach the Planet of Eternal Life. They deserved his respect despite their revolt. That also applied to a certain degree to Chaktor, the blue-skinned Ferron. He'd made it to Wanderer, albeit without authorization. Homunk respected his courage, even though he had clearly been led astray. But as for Carfesch...

The scout was sitting apart from the others. The gleam had disappeared from his marble eyes. They looked matte, like rotting fruits. He was leaning his elbows on his knees. To Homunk, it looked like he would collapse in on himself without that support.

Carfesch had to be conscious of what he had done—and afraid of the hard but righteous judgment that *It* would pass on him. The scout and the Intotronic were connected by a rivalry stretching back thousands of years, and Homunk had imagined many times what a triumph it would be to expose Carfesch to *It* as a substandard servant for all time. Now the moment was nigh, but all that stirred in Homunk was pity.

Carfesch was broken.

Homunk turned away and looked down at Wanderer's rounded side rushing past them. This was the world that *It* had entrusted to

him, his First Servant. Wanderer was his raison d'être, and even after millennia, the half-planet's beauty effortlessly spellbound him. Green and blue dominated. The continents and numerous tiny islands were covered in bold, almost uninterrupted green, while the seas glistened in a variety of blue tones. Together, they formed a picture of harmony that filled even the Intotronic with deep peace.

Wanderer looked like a marvel of nature. In fact, the world had been shaped by invisible hands. And he, Homunk, was the guiding hand.

A network of tree trunks, branches, and seaweed floated on the sea below them, disturbing the well-balanced harmony. One of the Ilts' floating burrows. Why did *It* tolerate these pests? Why did he forbid Homunk from clearing Wanderer of those vermin? The Ilts didn't belong on the Planet of Eternal Life!

"Are you nervous?"

Jymenah's question was just as inappropriate as the hologram of Callibso. Homunk was the First Servant of *It.* Jymenah, meanwhile, was his servant, one he tolerated at best. It was not her place to inquire about his mood. Especially since her question hit a sore spot.

"What gives you that idea?" he asked back.

"In the last few days, unforeseen events have occurred one after another. Quiniu Soptor, who should never have come back to Wanderer, returned. But she's changed. She's unresponsive, possibly irreparably mentally confused. But before we could delve into that, Soptor disappeared from Wanderer as if she'd never existed. Instead, a blue-skinned man appeared out of nowhere. And Carfesch, the scout, rebelled, throwing away his immortality as if it were a burden weighing him down. That's reason enough for nerves, if you ask me."

Homunk let a few seconds pass before replying. The dwarf rarely spoke, and it was rarer still that she strung multiple sentences together. Jymenah was excited. She clearly believed that important events were about to unfold. Rightly so?

"Unforeseen things have happened, yes," the Intotronic conceded. "But they're events with no greater significance. Nothing more than rippling waves on the ocean's surface."

"Do you think that? If the waves build up, a storm is brewing above the ocean. Taken on their own, each event is insignificant. But taken together... And there's one unifying factor."

“Namely?”

“Perry Rhodan. All these beings awaiting *Its* judgment speak of Perry Rhodan. Have you ever heard of him?”

“No,” Homunk answered honestly. And this fact truly unsettled him. The Intotronic strove for perfection. And perfection was only possible on a foundation of complete facts. This Perry Rhodan was disturbing his perfection.

“Perry Rhodan must be an exceptional being,” Jymenah continued. “Assuming he’s not a mere delusion. Wishful thinking that makes an unbearable existence bearable.”

“Like Callibso?”

Jymenah stiffened. “Callibso is not a delusion!” The dwarf’s eyes sparked with anger. If anyone other than Homunk had dared to make a remark like that, she’d have attacked and killed them.

“Oh, really? I only know the image you carry with you.” Homunk had hit Jymenah where it hurt. He confirmed with satisfaction that he could enjoy *this* triumph.

“And? That doesn’t prove anything! Callibso’s alive. And I’ll see him again!”

“You give your Callibso a lot of credit.”

“He’s exceptional!”

“As exceptional as the imaginary Perry Rhodan?”

“You… You…” Jymenah’s breath turned fitful. “You’re so cruel, Homunk!”

“I’m a machine. I’m structurally incapable of cruelty. And let’s assume Callibso really exists and imagine he was here with us. What would it change?”

“Everything!”

“Really? How would he act? What would he do?”

“I… I don’t know. I’m not like Callibso.” The dwarf closed her eyes and thought hard. “He’d act in a carefully considered way. He always says, ‘Even the mightiest storm can’t threaten the sky.’”

Homunk was about to reply, but just then, the glider reached the end of the world. Jymenah pulled the aircraft up, and they shot over the barrier that kept the round side’s sea in place. Shortly afterwards, they passed the energy shield that ensured the flat side’s atmosphere didn’t dissipate into space.

There was a jolt, followed by a popping sound. Homunk turned his attention to the glider’s rear section. Carfesch was used to the journey to Wanderer’s flat side, but the other beings must have

been doubting their sanity upon seeing the split planet.

To his amazement, only the blue-skinned one leaped up, stammering something about a vision. The old Arkonide, the woman, and the lizard exchanged meaningful glances with each other and whispered something about "A hemisphere. Like Tramp."

Tramp.

That name was as unfamiliar to Homunk as Perry Rhodan. What was Tramp? Judging by the remark, it was a world like Wanderer, a hemisphere. How did he, the First Servant of *It*, not know about it?

Jymenah accelerated, making the glider hurtle across the flat side at a low height. The dwarf was doing it to impress their prisoners. She succeeded. After a short while, the central plateau emerged on the horizon. Its vertical walls plummeted a full thousand meters. Water plunged over the edges and into the ground as flawless white foam.

The dwarf raced towards the plateau's rock face and veered right only at the last second, maintaining their height and following the course of the wall. Over and over, the glider pushed through clouds of foam. Countless droplets tried to cling to its transparent hull in vain. The airstream compressed them into rivulets and swept them from the glider's surface, leaving a trail in their wake.

The dwarf had calmed down again. She appeared to be focused entirely on steering the ship, absorbed in Wanderer's beauty. A thought occurred to Homunk. How old was Jymenah? She had been his servant for over a century. How long did she have left to live? He decided he'd ask the dwarf after *It* had passed his righteous judgments.

Once the glider had flown roughly halfway around the plateau, Jymenah forced it almost vertically upward, unveiling the summit itself:

The currents preparing to plunge over the edge towards the ground. The countless lakes and meadows. The machine city arranged as a ring around the middle summit...and the immense fountain of water that surged several kilometers into the sky.

Awe took hold of Homunk as she took them around the fountain. The artificial sun's light shone down at them from an angle, crafting innumerable rainbows. This was *Its* world. Unparalleled in the universe. And he, Homunk, was the First Servant of *It*, who had entrusted Wanderer to him. Homunk would

do anything to avoid letting *It* down.

Jymenah came in for the landing. She approached a clear space at the edge of the city. It was oval and bordered by columns. Homunk privately called this *Its* throne room. This was where *It* would receive them—and pass judgment on those who opposed him.

Softly, the glider touched down, and they got out. The prisoners were silent. Their movements were awkward, overcautious, as if they didn't trust their senses. As if they thought they were dreaming and one careless move could abruptly awaken them.

Then, suddenly, the woman raised an arm, pointed to the sky, and shouted, "Look!"

19.

Perry Rhodan

The invisible hand carried Rhodan. He estimated the distance separating him from the ground to be thirty, maybe forty meters. Impact would be deadly. But he wasn't afraid. The invisible hand had to belong to *It*. The same being who had called him to Wanderer and who had caught him. Why would *It* let him die now?

Rhodan touched a sensor panel. His suit's helmet folded back into a hood that nestled against his neck like a collar. Dense rain pelted down on him, and within seconds, the drops had soaked his hair as water poured down his face. It was warm and burned his eyes.

Salt water. The water in which he and his companions had traveled from one side of Wanderer to the other. He opened his mouth and licked his lips. He tasted the salt, the life. Was it a foretaste of eternal life?

The rain grew weaker, turning into fine droplets that hung in the air like mist as the invisible hand carried him closer to the fountain. Without the helmet's protection, the thunder of the water jet was deafening.

Below Rhodan, a city sprawled. It was not composed of transparent structures that made one think their mind was playing tricks on them, as on the other side, but steel-gray walls with occasional narrow windows like arrow slits.

This fortresslike city appeared to have one thing in common with its ethereal sister, however: it was equally empty.

"Where are you taking me?" Rhodan asked. The fountain's roar drowned out his words, but he was confident that wouldn't matter. *It* spoke to him in his thoughts, so it would also understand his thoughts.

Rhodan received no answer. His assumption must have been wrong. Or else *It* preferred to stay silent.

He glided farther across the city, noticing now that it formed a

ring around the fountain. He lacked any reliable frame of reference, but he estimated that the ring had to be at least a kilometer thick.

The fountain receded into the distance behind him. The roar quickly diminished, and the fine mist gave way to clear air. The wind carried the noise and rain away.

The invisible hand transported Rhodan over the city's last buildings. Grassland stretched beyond—and among the greenery was a cleared, oval-shaped patch. Columns surrounded it. A spacecraft had landed on the surface that was just like one he had seen on the other side of Wanderer. A droplet, cobalt blue and matte on the underside, silvery and shimmering on its upper portion.

Not far from the craft stood a few people. The invisible hand carried him over to them. The first one he recognized was Carfesch, the scout, who had brought him and his companions to Wanderer as stowaways. His silhouette was too long and gaunt for a human. And the shadow his protruding eyes cast on the ground was unmistakable.

Carfesch's presence was no surprise to Rhodan. The scout served *It.* It was only natural that he would be called to the flat side at least occasionally. But next to Carfesch stood a rather unusual being. A lizard that resembled a crocodile from a distance, only one that had decided to walk on two legs like a human.

Was it possible?

The lizard turned around and looked at Rhodan. A bright red patch covered one of his eyes. It was Trker-Hon, the Topsidan Wise One. Next to him, Rhodan could now make out Tatiana Michalovna. The petite telepath had an arm outstretched, pointing at him. And next to Michalovna stood the man for whose sake Rhodan and his companions had set out on this dangerous mission. The terminally ill man who had left everything behind to chase after the legend of eternal life. The man humanity could thank for opening the door to the stars.

Crest da Zoltral.

As if familiar with their background, the invisible hand carried Rhodan directly to the Arkonide. A few steps away from Crest, it gently set him down on the ground.

"Crest!" Rhodan managed to utter. "I... I don't have the words to express how I'm feeling right now..." He fell silent.

Crest da Zoltral said nothing. The old Arkonide had lost weight.

Deep furrows had engraved themselves into his face. He was shaking. Tears welled up in his eyes and ran down his cheeks. "Perry Rhodan! You shouldn't have come..."

Crest was afraid. For him!

"What's wrong?" Rhodan asked. "We're on the Planet of Eternal Life. Your wish has come true. Immortality isn't a legend—it's real."

"Yes..." Crest rubbed one hand over the other. The skin was saggy and covered in liver spots. "It's just—" The elderly Arkonide didn't get any further.

"Crest!" cried a bright, fervent voice. "Crest! You're alive!"

A slim figure ran past Rhodan and hugged the old man, squeezing him with all her might. It was Thora.

Rhodan turned around and saw that his other companions had also arrived. Sue was leading Soptor by the hand as if the half-Arkonide were a blind woman. Ras Tschubai had to lean on Bull, but the teleporter showed Rhodan with a smile that he was holding up well enough. The jumps had drained him; that was all.

"Crest, I'd given up all hope!" Thora embraced the elderly Arkonide, her foster father, so firmly that Rhodan wouldn't have been surprised if he had been broken in two. "Crest, I..." Her subsequent words were consumed by sobs. Rhodan had never seen the proud, restrained Arkonide like that before.

"Thora," Crest said at last. "How can—" He was cut off there as a star fell from the sky.

Gleaming light blinded Rhodan. He squinted and held his palm in front of his eyes. Soptor, unable to react, cried out. She bleated like an injured animal and sank to her knees, sobbing. Did the half-Arkonide know what was approaching them?

Rhodan opened up a tiny gap between his middle and index fingers. He saw a ball of light. It was plummeting towards them. Had it come from space? Or come loose from Wanderer's sun?

Moments later, it reached the ground, and Rhodan sensed a wave of heat pass over the unprotected skin of his head. It burned. The burning turned into an itching as the irritated skin was exposed once again to Wanderer's cool climate. Rhodan opened his eyes just a fraction and peered at the clearing through his fingers.

He saw a person he thought he'd said goodbye to forever. A person who had almost been more important to him than his parents. Who had taken his life without Rhodan ever understanding why.

“Karl!” Rhodan cried when he recognized his late uncle. “Karl!”

No reply came from the gaunt, bald man who was glowing from the inside. Instead, he smiled at Rhodan, as if to indicate that he didn’t need to worry about him. Then he raised a hand and waved it as if to bid him farewell.

Rhodan blinked and the luminous ball was back. It floated into the middle of the clearing now, roughly at eye level. Its light was still bright but bearable. Rhodan lowered his hand and opened his eyes completely. His companions did the same, except for Quiniu Soptor, who remained on her knees, whimpering softly.

The ball reminded him of how the energy being Harno had been described to him. But this…entity was markedly bigger. And, looking more closely, he could see that it didn’t actually have any kind of solid outline.

Welcome to Wanderer, Perry Rhodan! sounded a voice in his head.

“Who are you?” Rhodan asked. Out loud, so that the others could hear his words too. And against his better judgment, since there could only be one answer to his question.

Rhodan received that answer. *I am* It*,* said the telepathic voice. *I called to you.*

Called him to Wanderer. The Planet of Eternal Life. *I need you!* the voice had said in his vision. Why? How could this godlike being need his help?

But Rhodan asked, “What are you? Is this your natural form?”

I am It*. But right now, it is not me I want to talk about, but you, Perry Rhodan. The search for immortality has led you to me.*

Immortality. Rhodan felt his knees threaten to give way beneath him. *It* had called him here to make him immortal? From nearby, he heard a gasp. It came from Crest.

“*It*…” said the elderly Arkonide, his voice strained. “My companions and I passed the tests you impose on anyone seeking the Planet of Eternal Life. We are honored ones, as your servant Homunk called us. We—”

Silence, Arkonide! thundered *It. I will address you when I see fit!*

Crest swayed as if buffeted by a storm. He opened his mouth, about to protest, but then thought better of it.

I am speaking with Perry Rhodan, whom I summoned here. To whom I offer the gift of life.

The gift of life. Eternal life. Immortality. Now. Not as a promise

for the future. A dream so bold that hardly any human dared to dream it.

Immortality. Close enough to touch...

Yet Rhodan felt none of the gratitude and awe that this occasion should have called for. He thought about Rofus, ten thousand years in the past. The transmitter had flung them back to Vega's ninth planet back during the Ferron Dark Age. Nerlan the Ugly had taken him and his friends captive. The warlord had forced them to participate in the assault on Remanor, one of countless decisive battles in the Ferrons' century-long civil war that had yielded tens of thousands of dead and maimed people, but never a conclusion...

Rhodan thought of Reyan, the water planet. The transmitter had hurled them even further back in time, to Vega's seventh planet, where the Ferrons had stood on the cusp of civil war. A conference had made the decision between war and peace. Rhodan had tried to push the Ferrons towards peace. In vain. While *Its* cylinder ships had crossed the Vega system and done nothing to prevent the war whose imminent outbreak it *must* have known about...

Their next stop was Ambur, Vega's tenth planet, a few years after the civil war was finally settled. Ambur had been a harsh world, a place of refuge for the many Ferrons who didn't fit into the new, strictly organized postwar society. *Its* cylinder ships had forced the Ferrons to leave that world, in preparation for *It* to take it over...

At each step of their journey, they had been confronted with immeasurable suffering. With endless death. Why? What for?

"You're wrong, *It*," said Rhodan. "I didn't come to Wanderer for the sake of immortality, nor because you called to me in a vision. My companions and I set out to rescue our friend Crest da Zoltral." He looked over at the Arkonide, who had once more found the strength to stay on his feet without Thora's aid, and nodded. "All of humanity, and I personally, are in his debt. Fear of death drove Crest to brave one of your transmitters. Crest believed there was a grain of truth to the legends about the Planet of Eternal Life. But what did he find? Suffering and death!"

How do you know that, Perry Rhodan? You and Crest da Zoltral took separate paths.

"In principle, our paths were the same. We all left our fates to

the transmitters you scattered across the Vega system. We all faced the tests you concocted to ensure that only those you deemed worthy made it to Wanderer. Isn't that true?"

You have a sharp mind, Perry Rhodan.

"Maybe. That's for others to judge. But there's one thing I have for certain: a conscience. And my conscience takes issue with you! How, I ask myself? How could a being capable of technical marvels like transmitters or stable half-planets, a being that can even grant immortality, witness so much suffering and death and not act? Why didn't you prevent the Ferron civil war? You have mastery over time and space! It would have been child's play to you!"

It took a few seconds before the ball of light answered him. Did it have to think about the question?

It wouldn't have been right. I acted as I was able to. Consider that without me, there would be no Thort who puts an end to the Dark Age.

"That's your answer? That's your whole answer? You watched a century of murder and did nothing because it supposedly wouldn't have been right to prevent it?" Rhodan turned away and pointed to the whimpering Quiniu Soptor. "What happened to her?"

I don't know.

"You don't know? Quiniu went through a transmitter—and just look at what your tests did to her! You've robbed her of her mind! You claim to know the secret of immortality, don't you? Healing Quiniu must be trivial for you. Help her!"

I cannot. Her recovery must come from within her.

Rhodan's gaze fixed on the tearful half-Arkonide. Was *It* telling the truth? He turned to the glowing ball again. "I have no way to verify your statement. I'll accept it as true for now."

I'm glad that at least my information is adequate for you, Perry Rhodan.

Was Rhodan mistaken or was there an amused undertone to the voice? "Only as far as Quiniu Soptor is concerned. And what about the Ilts?" He thought briefly of Kitrai and her people. Without their help, he and his companions would have drowned at the barrier and never found the way to Wanderer's flat side through the vortex.

I'm aware of the Ilts. What about them?

"You have them hunted and killed as soon as they dare set foot on the mainland!"

I have my reasons.

"What reasons can there be to kill?"

You wouldn't want to understand them, Perry Rhodan.

"You're awfully sure of yourself. Too sure!" The entity's self-importance stoked his anger. "You have mastery over time and space. You know the secret of eternal life. With Wanderer, you've proven that you can create a world that should be impossible. In human terms, you're all-powerful. But power also brings responsibility with it. Why don't you use it to help?"

I do that, Perry Rhodan. But—

"But what?" Rhodan said, interrupting the voice in his mind. "Let me guess: I wouldn't understand. Right? You—"

Hands grabbed his shoulders hard. It was Bull. "Perry, that's enough!" said his friend imploringly. "I'm the one around here whose angry outbursts put our necks on the line. And I'm telling you that's enough now! If you don't stop right now, he...*It* is going to put our lights out!"

Rhodan put his hands on his friend's and squeezed them firmly. "It's too late for that, Reg. I said what I needed to say. Let *It* kill us if it wants to." He looked at the glowing ball. It flickered and began to pulse in a fast rhythm.

Then, Rhodan heard loud laughter in his thoughts. *I like you, human! But before I come back to you, I have another matter to deal with...*

20.

Carfesch

Now, to you, Carfesch, said *It.*

The scout was convinced that the moment of his death had arrived. *It* didn't like it when anyone violated its will. And the accusations Perry Rhodan had hurled at his master... Carfesch still doubted his senses. No one had ever dared to verbally attack *It.*

It would not be amused.

Carfesch waited in silence to meet his fate. An unbearable fire burned under his nails; his breath rattled at a hectic pace. Diagonally behind him stood Homunk, his rival. Carfesch, whose protruding marble eyes gave him perfect panoramic vision, didn't have to turn his head to observe the Intotronic. Homunk appeared unmoved, but Carfesch knew better. The Intotronic felt triumphant, hardly able to wait for the moment of his death. The expression on his servant Jymenah's face betrayed him. Naked hatred filled the dwarf's eyes.

Carfesch wondered what he had ever done to her. What had been done to her by others. The scout wished his ship were with him. It was his only companion. He realized how grotesque that fact was. At the end of his life, which had amounted to many, many times his natural life span, a machine was the only being he had left that was close to him. Had these lifetimes even been worth living?

You have disregarded my will, Carfesch, said *It. On Ambur, you allowed Perry Rhodan and his companions to infiltrate your ship. You put it in danger, even though you knew that the struggle allows for no unnecessary risks. But that was only the beginning. You flew the unauthorized passengers to Wanderer. You deceived my First Servant, Homunk. You tried to hide Quiniu Soptor from me. You let the intruders go free, giving them the chance to do what no one else ever has: reach the far side of Wanderer, reserved for me alone, by their own power.*

The voice went silent for a moment. The glowing ball pulsed and flickered.

What do you have to say for yourself?

Until moments ago, Carfesch hadn't known the answer to this question. He would have tortured himself with it. But when *It* spoke the question, Carfesch saw the truth. He answered aloud: "I did what I did because it seemed right to me."

And you believe that is answer enough?

Carfesch searched for a reply, but *It* continued too quickly. *Is that also the justification for your actions, Perry Rhodan? Because it seemed right to you? Is that the reasoning behind you three—Crest da Zoltral, Tatiana Michalovna, and Trker-Hon—standing up to my First Servant, Homunk? Is that why Quiniu Soptor, who should never have returned to my world, came back here? A mere feeling?*

Those being addressed did not say a word.

Homunk, my true servant! What would be the appropriate consequence for these beings?

"There is only one, master. Elimination." The Intotronic's reply came without hesitation.

That is true. They have committed errors.

"In the struggle, there can be no errors," Homunk said. "Too much is at stake."

That's true, Homunk. There can be no errors. But these beings' errors rest on them being fickle, emotion-driven organic creatures.

"Yes, master," Homunk quickly agreed.

Have you ever wondered why I concern myself with organic beings at all?

"I..." The Intotronic hesitated. "Yes, many times. You could make as many servants like me as you wish. Servants who would never make mistakes. Servants whose loyalty is unconditional."

That's correct. It would be a simple matter for me to rely solely on servants like you, Homunk. But I decided against it. Do you know why?

"I... Master, I..."

Carfesch followed this twist in the conversation with astonishment. The scout couldn't remember the Intotronic ever being lost for words before.

Allow me to help you, Homunk. I rely on living beings like Carfesch because of their imperfection. They make mistakes, they go astray; feelings stir them that they don't even understand themselves. And from time to time, they disregard my will and become rebels.

"Master, I don't understand. What reason could there be to prioritize imperfection over perfection?"

Imperfection is the essence of life. It is what makes change possible. Life is change. Regardless of what form life takes in the universe, it produces new life, and this reproduction introduces errors, mutations. Alongside thousands that give disadvantages, maybe one comes along that gives an advantage. But this one positive mutation can only emerge at the cost of the many negative ones. Our struggle requires both. Servants like you, Homunk, whom I can blindly trust never to err. And servants like Carfesch, who defy me from time to time and force me to question myself.

What was going on? Carfesch heard *Its* words echoing in his thoughts, but he couldn't grasp them. What was his master getting at? A moment later, the scout learned the answer.

Carfesch will live. I will grant his upcoming cell regeneration.

The scout's pulse lurched, pounding hard in his skull. *It* had forgiven him! He would live! *Live!*

He heard his master's next words as if from a distance.

And now back to you, Perry Rhodan...

21.

Perry Rhodan

It.

One syllable. A name that couldn't be shorter—or more ambiguous. What was it, Rhodan wondered?

One thing was clear: *It* was not a living being of flesh and blood. But could living beings exist that *weren't* of flesh and blood? In the months since he and Bull had first laid eyes on the Arkonide cruiser that had made an emergency landing on the Moon, Rhodan had experienced things he couldn't have imagined in his wildest dreams. He had long believed that the word "impossible" was appropriate only in the rarest cases. By now, he had learned that it represented an impossibility in and of itself.

After all, *It* existed.

Was it a machine? That would explain a lot. There was the fact that it appeared to be a glowing ball that had fallen from the sky and had clearly traveled through space on its own power, unharmed by the vacuum and cold of space. It floated and could speak in their thoughts. It had managed to create the hemispherical planet of Wanderer. Last but not least, it claimed to be able to grant immortality.

And finally, even though moments ago he had still been fully absorbed in his pent-up rage, Rhodan had to admit *It* had shown a wisdom in his judgment of Carfesch that a being could only possess if it had faults of its own.

You have passed the tests I impose upon those seeking eternal life with flying colors, Perry Rhodan, said *It. You and your companions have shown outstanding courage, judgment, and adaptability. And most importantly, selflessness. This combination is seen only rarely. Few who crave immortality can exhibit all this.*

"We only did what we had to."

No. You did far more than that. On your homeworld's moon, you were faced with a decision that surely overwhelmed you. In the blink of

an eye, the Arkonide ship brought your entire worldview crumbling down. Everything you and your culture stood for no longer applied. But instead of reacting with fear and aggression, you saw the opportunity it offered to you and humanity. A new existence among the stars. Peace and prosperity for Earth.

"Our oxygen was running out," Rhodan replied. "Reg and I would have suffocated if we hadn't found a way to get on board the *Aetron*."

That's correct, but it doesn't change the fact that you threw off the shackles of your origins. You set out for the Moon as a member of a tribe: the Americans. You returned as a human, a Terran.

"You overstate my role. I'm just an ordinary human."

Yes, and every human, every living being is capable of steering his own destiny, that of his culture, even the entire universe onto a new course. Think back to Reyan, Perry Rhodan. You were ready to risk a time paradox that would have obliterated you and the world as you knew it to prevent the Ferron civil war.

"I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself if I'd watched and done nothing. You clearly made a different decision." The anger flared up in Rhodan again. *It* could have prevented the Ferron civil war. It hadn't.

That's true. You, Perry Rhodan, made your decision based on your knowledge. I made mine based on my knowledge.

"You know a lot. You gave me and Chaktor that vision."

Yes.

"Why?"

It pleases me to follow your development and that of humanity.

"That's not an answer. You mentioned a 'struggle' that allows for no mistakes. Why waste even a fraction of your attention on a trivial, far-flung planet like Earth?"

You underestimate humanity.

"Like you overestimate yourself? You conduct yourself like a god, *It*. But you're no god!"

Are you sure, Perry Rhodan? Most cultures of your homeworld would see me as a god. I'm omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent.

"You are none of those things. If you were omnipresent, you wouldn't need a First Servant like Homunk or a scout like Carfesch. And as far as omniscience and omnipotence: the fact that my companions and I are standing before you proves that things aren't as rosy as you like to think."

It fell silent for a few moments. Stunned, perhaps? Then he broke out into peals of laughter. *Perry Rhodan, do you honestly believe I didn't know about your arrival? That I haven't purposely tolerated what has occurred on Wanderer over the past few days?*

"That's possible," Rhodan conceded. In his thoughts, he admitted that anything else bordered on impossible. *It*, his servant Homunk, the robots of Wanderer... How could they all have been deceived by a handful of savages who had arrived at random?

Only...he and his companions hadn't arrived at random. *It* had summoned them.

Out loud, Rhodan said, "Maybe you are a god. But since when does a god call for help?"

Did I do that?

"Yes. In the vision on Gol. I saw Wanderer, both sides of it. And I heard your voice in my thoughts, just like now. *Come, Perry Rhodan! I need you!* I followed your call. I did my part. Tell me: why do you need me?"

Step forward, Perry Rhodan!

"Why?" He didn't stir from his spot.

I summoned you to the Planet of Eternal Life. What for, do you think?

"That doesn't answer my question. Why do you need me?"

You'll receive the answer to your question as soon as you have accepted immortality. Step forward, Perry Rhodan!

Immortality. It was as if Rhodan had taken a blow that left him reeling. He felt dizzy. Eternal life! He would never die...

His thoughts were interrupted by a groan. It came from Crest. The elderly Arkonide staggered and would have fallen if Thora and Trker-Hon hadn't caught him together. The dream of eternal life was coming true—and this realization threatened to overwhelm Crest. Justifiably so. Crest was an old man, and his cancer must have grown inexorably since he had gone through the transmitter near the Azores on Earth. It must have metastasized all over his body. The Arkonide might only have a few days left to live, and here he stood on the cusp of immortality.

Could *It* also heal Crest's cancer, Rhodan wondered? And...was *It* even prepared to do so?

"Why only me?" Rhodan asked. "What about my companions?"

On this day, only one being can receive immortality. One last time: step forward, Perry Rhodan!

Rhodan waited for a cry from Crest, but there was none. Just a sigh like he had never heard before. As if the last of the Arkonide's strength had been used up and his will to live had finally left him.

To Perry Rhodan, this was a demand stronger than *Its*.

"No." Rhodan took a step back. "I don't need your immortality."

22.

Perry Rhodan

The miniature ship led Perry Rhodan to Crest. A forearm-length *Stardust* guided them through the cylinder. It was a hologram and thus the kind of far superior technology by Earth standards that had become an everyday sight to him over the last few weeks. But what made Rhodan marvel was the simulated shuttle's perfection. The *Stardust* had been reproduced exactly, down to the smallest detail. Where had the cylinder ship gotten that knowledge? And what else might the ship, or Carfesch the scout, or *It* himself know about him and humanity?

One last hatch slid aside before Rhodan, revealing a room by the cylinder's hull. It looked like an observation point. The hull was transparent, giving an unobstructed view of space. Stars and interstellar clouds flew past at a speed that reminded him of being on a passenger aircraft on Earth and looking down at the lights of towns and villages.

In the half darkness stood a tall, thin man: Crest da Zoltral, the elderly Arkonide.

Rhodan had barely completed that thought when he corrected himself. Crest was no longer old. The Arkonide's posture was full of tension, like that of a young man brimming with strength.

"Come right in, Rhodan," Crest said quietly. "You're not disturbing me."

"Thanks!" Rhodan stepped forward. He wondered how Crest had heard him. The hatch had opened silently, and he himself hadn't made a sound—or if he had, the cylinder's soft humming had drowned it out. Was it a coincidence that Crest had heard him? Or was it a sign that the Crest coming back from Wanderer was a changed being? Had *It* given the Arkonide more than eternal life?

"Isn't the view breathtaking?" Crest asked.

Rhodan nodded. The cylinder was flying at translight speed. Neither he nor Crest knew Wanderer's location, but Rhodan was

sure that the ship was crossing light-months, if not light-years, in the blink of an eye. Distances that humans could scarcely have imagined crossing until a few weeks prior.

"This ship is a wonder," Crest stated. He belonged to a civilization with technology at its disposal that was already a wonder by human standards. "We Arkonides have had translight technology for millennia. Our transition drives catapult our ships light-years in an instant through five-dimensional space. But a transition is an act of brute force, accompanied by pain and complications for the crew that we can only mitigate, not avoid. It has none of the elegance, the effortlessness of this journey. We're gliding through space and time!"

"So you believe Carfesch is bringing us back to our present?"

"I don't have the slightest doubt."

As if to confirm it, the ship slowed down. A single yellow star grew rapidly. It had to be Earth's sun, or Sol as more and more people were calling it. In a way, it had lost its uniqueness. When Rhodan had encountered the Arkonides on the Moon, it became clear that countless suns in the universe shone on planets that bore life. The sun had become ordinary. But Rhodan felt his skin tingle as it came into view. The sun and Earth were a special place for him, and always would be—his home.

"Soon, we'll be back on Earth," Crest said. He sought eye contact with Rhodan. "I want to take this opportunity to thank you, Rhodan. Without you, I would be dead by now, killed on the stranded *Aetron* by my culture's rigidity." Tears of heightened emotion welled up in the Arkonide's eyes. "I'm ashamed of my fellow Arkonides. And when I think that I came so close to abandoning you and Bull on the Moon and leaving you to die by suffocation!"

"That was a long time ago," Rhodan said.

"A few short months!"

"According to the calendar, sure. Calendars have a certain significance, but only a limited one. In my heart, our first meeting on the Moon was half an eternity ago. And any grudge I'd have against you is water under the bridge."

"I... I thank you." Crest bowed his head and rubbed the tears from his eyes with the index finger and thumb of his right hand. "I'll keep these days in my memory as a reminder forever."

The Arkonide reached to his chest and lifted the item he wore

around his neck on a chain like a piece of jewelry. Its shape and size were not unlike a chicken's egg from Earth. Its surface was a matte gray reminiscent of brushed metal.

A cell activator.

"Immortality in my hands," Crest said slowly. "I'd never have believed it possible."

Rhodan shook his head. "No. You always believed that immortality was possible. That's why you've now achieved it."

The Arkonide ran his index finger along the device. "*It* said this would heal my cancer."

"Do you think it was lying?"

"No. I can feel the power the cell activator is giving me. I still haven't found the words to describe the sensation. But I have no doubt that *It* spoke the truth in that regard. I'm certain that medical examinations on Earth will confirm my impression."

Rhodan didn't doubt it either. A mere arm's length separated him from Crest, and up close, the change occurring in the Arkonide was unmistakable. The liver spots on his skin were visibly disappearing; the wrinkles were losing their depth; even the swollen bags under his eyes were returning to a normal size. It appeared that Crest da Zoltral hadn't just been granted immortality, but also rejuvenation. How far would it go?

Similar thoughts must have been going through the Arkonide's mind, but he looked as if he were carrying an invisible weight.

"You've received the greatest gift imaginable," Rhodan said, "but you don't look all that happy."

"Oh, that'll come!" Crest let go of the cell activator and made a dismissive hand gesture as the device fell onto his chest. "It's just...since my childhood, the legend of the Planet of Eternal Life has fascinated me. From the very first moment, I sensed that it was more than just a legend. I've been tracing it for my entire adult life. Secretly, for the most part, to avoid mockery from those around me. I didn't have the courage to stand by my fascination. I only found that when my life was approaching its end. Far too late. The *Aetron* mission was no more than the desperate act of a dying old man."

Crest fell silent a moment, then collected himself.

"Now my dream has come true. I found the Planet of Eternal Life. I've gained immortality—and yet I feel no joy. Can you understand that, Rhodan?"

"I think so. As a kid, I had a dream. I wanted to fly. But not

with an engine—to really fly. Like a bird. My parents didn't like it and did everything to hold me back. But I didn't give up. I saved up my allowance and earned a little on top of that until I had enough to pay for a paraglider flight—in tandem."

"How old were you?"

"Nine. The tandem master shouldn't really have taken me along. Not without my parents' permission, but I couldn't let them hear about it. They'd forbidden it. He took me anyway. I think because he sensed how much I yearned for it. And the flight… The flight was breathtaking. We caught a good thermal and kept going for nearly two hours. I should have been the happiest kid on Earth."

"But you weren't."

"No. I felt empty. I pictured the flight being way better."

"But you became a pilot later on anyway?"

"Yeah. I still wanted to fly. But that first flight showed me that I wanted to fly a different way. Not as a passenger—I wanted to be in control. I need to understand that first." Rhodan pointed at the cell activator. "I'm not trying to overstate the relevance of my story to yours. But I think your task now is to *understand* immortality, Crest."

"I fear that will take a long time." The Arkonide wrapped his hand around the cell activator and shut his eyes for a moment. To Rhodan, it seemed like Crest was looking inside himself, sensing the power the device was granting him. "But if there's one thing I have now, it's time." He opened his eyes again. "I just don't know if I'll get over the guilt."

"What guilt? You didn't do anything during *Its* tests that you need to feel guilty about."

"I hope not. But that's not the guilt I mean. The immortality wasn't really meant for me. *It* chose you, Rhodan."

"Yes, but I decided to give *you* immortality, Crest."

"You shouldn't have done that!"

"I couldn't have done anything else. I'm young and healthy. You're… You *were* old and sick. Even if Sue had managed to beat the cancer destroying your body with her para-gift, you'd only have had a few years left. Too few for what you have planned. We need you, Crest!"

"I feel honored in a way I can't describe." Tears welled in the Arkonide's eyes again and ran down his cheeks. "I am forever in your debt, Rhodan."

The sun had come closer by now. It had grown so large that it was as if the two men were looking up at the celestial body from Earth's surface. Rhodan could make out other planets too: a red marble that must have been Mars and a larger one with a ring. Saturn. Like a projection in a planetarium. And that idea wasn't far off, he suddenly realized. He and Crest weren't looking into space through a conventional window; the ship was showing it to them with a special display.

"And there's one more question I can't get out of my head," Crest added.

"The price."

"Yes." Crest looked at Rhodan, astonished. "I knew you had a sharp mind from the moment I met you, but—"

"Your praise is misplaced. Some of Reg's practical disposition must have rubbed off on me over the years. One of his favorite sayings is 'There ain't no such thing as a free lunch.' Everything in life comes at a cost, in other words. Including eternal life."

"Your friend is a remarkable man, Rhodan."

"Just don't let Reg hear you say that!" Rhodan smiled. "You won't hear the end of it for the rest of your immortal days!"

"I'll be on my guard." A smile crept across the Arkonide's face, then he grew serious again. "Yes, I'm wondering what the price of immortality is."

"As far as *It* goes, he didn't name one." Truly, he hadn't. But Rhodan couldn't help thinking of the few words Quiniu Soptor had said in the catamaran when he had touched her. "Perry Rhodan! I... Ernst Ellert... You... I'm supposed to..."

What had the half-Arkonide been trying to tell him? Was it a request? A warning? The German man's spirit had left his body and was journeying through space and time. Had he encountered *It* along the way? And if so, what did he know about it?

"*It* will require a price," Crest said, interrupting Rhodan's thoughts. "It can't do otherwise."

"The struggle?" *It* had only mentioned that in passing. But it had immediately been clear to Rhodan that the word was the most important one the entity had uttered.

"The struggle," Crest confirmed. "A struggle refers to a conflict. I must confess, that scares me."

"There's no reason for that," Rhodan insisted. "Whatever this struggle may be, it's a battle that *It* is fighting, not us."

“It’s easy to say that.” Ridges formed on Crest’s forehead. “But what if we get caught in the middle of it? Think back to humanity’s recent history. A multitude of cultures exist on Earth, some of them technologically advanced, some further behind. All too often, the technologically primitive cultures were subjugated or even wiped out by the advanced ones. Or the advanced ones used the primitive ones for proxy wars. Compared to *It*, even Arkonide culture is primitive. In the event of a conflict, we’d be powerless.”

“That may well be. But I have two points I’d like you to consider. First, superior technology doesn’t always mean that one culture is superior to another. Just think of our meeting on the Moon, Crest.”

“As I said already, I’ll never forget it. What’s your second argument?”

“That I’d rather die knowing than not knowing. We—”

A voice interrupted Rhodan. “In a few minutes we’ll reach Earth.”

Carfesch the scout had entered. With his marble eyes, breathing hole, and lipless mouth, he only faintly resembled a human or Arkonide. But Rhodan was immediately reminded of Crest. Carfesch stood upright, looking years younger than before. *It* had granted the scout eternal life as well, at least partially. Carfesch had received a cell regeneration. He was rejuvenated but would age again and—if *It* saw fit—would one day receive another regeneration, another lifetime.

The price Carfesch paid for immortality was clear: he had committed his entire being to *It* and the struggle.

When Rhodan and Crest didn’t respond to his statement, the scout bowed.

“If you’d be so kind, honored ones…”

Carfesch led Rhodan and Crest through the ship. A holo accompanied the trio, depicting their approach to Earth. The blue planet emerged out of the blackness of space. The ship swung into orbit and finally came in for a landing near Terrania.

“The ship made contact with your government,” Carfesch said when Rhodan saw the enormous crowd of people that had gathered at the edge of the Juyan salt lake. “It wanted to be sure that its approach wouldn’t cause any misunderstandings with potentially tragic consequences.”

The cylinder landed. Almost. The huge spacecraft floated a few

meters above the ground. They reached the hangar, where their companions awaited and were already disembarking. An invisible gangway led down to the ground.

Bull was the first to reach it. Rhodan's friend sprinted ahead and fell forward onto his knees in the Gobi sand. He dug into it with both hands and threw some boisterously into the air.

The others followed at a more measured pace. They looked dazed, hardly seeming able to grasp what was happening. Sue led Quiniu Soptor by the hand, the half-Arkonide following her willingly.

Rhodan turned to the scout. "Carfesch, thank you for everything you've done for me and my friends. And I ask you to forgive the difficulties we caused you. I promise, it was never remotely our intention to harm you."

"You didn't harm me. Quite the opposite." A soft rustling sound accompanied the scout drawing a deep breath as the protective mesh over his nose hole trembled. "I have the privilege of a life span far beyond that of an ordinary mortal. But this privilege hides the danger of only repeating the same ways of thinking and acting that I've practiced over thousands of years. You shook me up. I'm indebted to you."

Thora was second to last to set foot on the hot desert sand. She turned around to look for her foster father.

"I'm coming, Thora!" Crest called. The Arkonide bowed to the scout and floated towards the ground.

"Farewell, Carfesch!" Rhodan said in parting. "Will we see each other again?"

"I'm certain," the scout replied. "If not in this life, then in another."

Rhodan had hardly touched the sand when the ship accelerated. Moments later, it was just a tiny speck in the sky.

And then the speck disappeared as if it had never existed at all.

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